

# Tristan Garel-Jones, Tory 'wet' and able deputy chief whip under Margaret Thatcher – obituary

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By, Telegraph Obituaries

Lord Garel-Jones, who has died aged 79, was a Tory “wet” who was deputy chief whip under [Margaret Thatcher](#) – and was demonised by her supporters for having supposedly engineered her removal in November 1990.

When Sir Anthony Meyer staged his “stalking-horse” challenge to her leadership in 1989, Garel-Jones worked secretly on her behalf, and the following spring he warned her of “100 assassins lurking in the bushes”.

In a private note to the chief whip Tim Renton, however, Garel-Jones warned that support for Mrs Thatcher “could not be relied upon if a ‘proper’ candidate entered the field”, adding: “I regard it as very possible that Michael Heseltine could not resist making a challenge next year and that he might well force a second round, with all the consequences that flow from that.

“I believe that this is the beginning of the end for Mrs Thatcher. The job of the [Whips] Office, it seems to me, is to try and manage the end in a way that does not split the Party. This means avoiding the daylight assassination of the Prime Minister by her enemies. I ... would rather lose the next election with the Prime Minister we have than risk the bitter factionalism that would follow her forced removal. But that might not be an option ... All the ingredients exist for a fight. Unless ...”

Unless what? As Charles Moore noted in the third volume of his authorised biography of Margaret Thatcher, Garel-Jones did not say, indicating, Moore suggested, that “he wanted ... to find a decorous way of ... letting Mrs Thatcher go. He deplored ‘daylight assassination’, but not, by implication, her night-time replacement by her ‘friends’ in the Cabinet.”

By the time Michael Heseltine challenged for the leadership, Mrs Thatcher had moved Garel-Jones to the Foreign Office. But he retained the cunning, charm, nose for trouble and desire to make things work that had made him so valuable to her as a whip.

Offering to help the Thatcher campaign, he was told he was not needed. Privately, they had him down as “doubtful” or “against”.

On the night of November 20, after the first ballot showed 152 MPs against her and 60 abstaining, but before she decided to pull out, Garel-Jones invited to his house in Catherine Place, Victoria, ministers who believed Heseltine had to be stopped and would not vote against Mrs Thatcher.

His intent was to convince her that her position was untenable, even if – as he believed – she could still scrape a win. Ministers present were [Alan Clark](#), Douglas Hogg, Alan Howarth, Douglas Hurd, Norman Lamont, [Tony Newton](#), Chris Patten, John Patten, Malcolm Rifkind, Richard Ryder, William Waldegrave and Tim Yeo.

The meeting could not agree on a champion to take on Heseltine; Garel-Jones thought Hurd best-placed to keep him out, but was outflanked by supporters of John Major.

Mrs Thatcher’s team still wanted to fight on. John Wakeham belatedly asked Garel-Jones to join the campaign; he said he only would if she were told her ministers thought she was finished (in her memoirs she wrote that he refused).

After making a Commons statement on the Paris EC summit, Mrs Thatcher met her Cabinet one by one. All told her they would back her but were not sure she would win; Chris Patten and Kenneth Clarke urged her to pull out. The opinions of Norman Lamont, Peter Lilley and Michael Howard that she would lose carried more weight, and after agonising she withdrew. Thatcher loyalists accused Garel-Jones of “knifing her in the back” by calling the meeting.

Garel-Jones had promised Hurd years before that “if it tumbles, I shall come knocking on your door”, and campaigned for him despite being a close friend of Major. He then served under Major until leaving the government in 1993, having helped the Maastricht treaty scrape through Parliament.

Mrs Thatcher liked Garel-Jones despite their differences, rating him a “Mr Fixit”. His friendship with her political secretary Charles Powell, a schoolmate, kept him on side. But Norman Tebbit saw him as the arch-schemer for the “wets”, using the black arts of the whips’ office. As early as 1986 Wakeham, then chief whip, had to declare “full confidence” in Garel-Jones as Tebbit and like-minded Tories worked to undermine him.

Garel-Jones would perch on the bottom stair of the gangway by the end of the front bench, swivelling his eyes over the Tory ranks for trouble. When he detected it he was blunt: in 1985 there were complaints that he had warned rebels on top people’s pay that a government defeat would bring Mrs Thatcher’s resignation and end their own hopes of a job.

As Minister for Europe he was equally forthright. A Labour MEP accused him of calling the French “frogs” in Strasbourg, and a description of Germans as “Huns” brought obloquy from Sir Edward Heath.

He could also be cavalier on points of detail; during the Maastricht debates the Attorney General, Sir Nicholas Lyell, had to come to the House to refute Garel-Jones's claim that if one Labour amendment were passed Britain would be unable to ratify the Treaty.

Brought up in Madrid, where he kept a dazzling collection of contemporary Spanish art, the teetotal Garel-Jones's apparently Castilian features were misleading; he was entirely Welsh (and, as it happens, a chain-smoker). But his fluency in Spanish (as well as Welsh and French) led to his acting as an emissary to Argentina (the first time after the Falklands conflict), Chile and Mexico, where he negotiated the loan of London Zoo's giant panda.

William Armand Thomas Tristan Garel-Jones was born at Gorseinon, Swansea, on February 28 1941, the son of Bernard Garel-Jones, a lawyer who drove a bus during the General Strike, and Meriel, née Williams, a miner's daughter who became an Eisteddfod prize-winner. When his father was posted to India the family moved to Llangennech, near Llanelli, Tristan attending a Welsh-speaking school.

In 1948 Bernard Garel-Jones moved to Madrid to teach English. Tristan was sent to King's School, Canterbury, where he shone at rugby, playing also for London Welsh schoolboys and for Kent. Years later he told the Yorkshire miners' MP Mick Welsh that the communal showers each had experienced gave them something in common. “Aye, lad,” replied Welsh. “But we didn't have to worry when we bent down to pick up the soap.”

Tristan returned to Madrid to start a language school with his father. An early student, Catalina Garrigues, was an industrialist's daughter who became his wife in 1966. The school thrived, and Tristan diversified into property; he would be less fortunate as a “name” at Lloyd's.

Garel-Jones moved to London in 1970 to join the bankers William Brandt. He became active in Tory politics, and in February 1974, when Heath's government was defeated, fought Caernarvon. That October he contested Watford, losing by 3,957 votes.

He joined Conservative Central Office, surviving Heath's replacement by Mrs Thatcher, and in 1978 Lord Thorneycroft, her party chairman, appointed Garel-Jones his assistant. In the 1979 election that brought her to power he captured Watford from Labour by 3,290 votes.

At Westminster Garel-Jones was a founder member of the Blue Chip group of leftish newcomers, who first met in William Waldegrave's kitchen. He rebelled to back a Labour move to increase child benefit, and criticised [Geoffrey Howe's](#) economic policies. But his ability had been noted, and after a spell as PPS to the civil service minister [Barney Hayhoe](#), he was appointed a whip under Michael Jopling in 1982.

Garel-Jones had a close shave at his first whips' office Christmas party. He told his daughter to go into the next room and ring what he said was the prime minister's direct line. In fact it was the phone beside him; when it rang he replied: “Hello, this is the Prime Minister”, only for a familiar voice behind him to bark: “Tristan!”

After the 1983 election, when his majority rose to 12,006, he was promoted to Lord Commissioner of the Treasury, a senior whip. In 1986 he was one of 35 Tories to join the Opposition on a free vote to ban the cane in schools; Labour later blamed him for the killing of 38 private members' Bills.

In July 1988 he was promoted again, to deputy chief whip. That October the outgoing chief, David Waddington, recommended Garel-Jones for the job, but Mrs Thatcher opted for Tim Renton. She later felt that had she appointed Garel-Jones she would have survived. He was, among other things, readier than almost any other Tory to warn the prime minister of the trouble the poll tax and her policies on Europe were causing.

In July 1990 Mrs Thatcher moved Garel-Jones to Minister of State at the Foreign Office. He visited Argentina, praising its government's readiness to tackle its problems, and put the issue of Falklands sovereignty aside, but he fared less well in Gibraltar; when he proposed replacing the wall separating the Rock from Spain with tubs of flowers, locals called him a Spaniard.

Major kept him at the FCO, where he became heavily involved in negotiating Maastricht, rebutting points of detail aimed at turning Europe into a “superstate”. In August 1991 the Majors stayed at Garel-Jones's house south of Madrid; at the end of the year, with the Treaty agreed, he was appointed a Privy Counsellor.

□  
Garel-Jones during the Matrix Churchill arms-to-Iraq case Credit: Roy Letkey

As the Eurosceptic Right mobilised against Maastricht, Garel-Jones worked with Major to limit the rebellion, branding attempts to scupper the Treaty “perverse, reckless, bizarre, absurd and indefensible”. He announced at the end of 1992 that he would leave the government once it was ratified, and did so.

Garel-Jones was caught up in the Matrix-Churchill affair, over ministers' complicity in the export of equipment of potential military worth to Iraq in defiance of sanctions. He was one of four ministers who signed public interest certificates withholding sensitive documents from the trial of two executives who turned out to have been acting with ministerial connivance.

He was unrepentant about signing the certificates to protect informants, and told Lord Scott's inquiry as much. Unlike William Waldegrave and Nicholas Lyell – both of whom came within a whisker of being forced to resign – there was no suggestion that he had misled Parliament.

From the back benches, Garel-Jones warned the Eurosceptics that they could force the party into opposition for a decade (it would in fact be 17 years). As Major called on them to "put up or shut up", he wrote: "The big question is whether the Conservative Party is capable of supporting any Tory prime minister."

Just before the 1997 election – when he left the Commons, becoming a life peer – Garel-Jones called for Major and Tony Blair to lead a pro-European Commons majority to adopt the euro. He blamed his party's subsequent rout on "the disloyalty and deceit of a small number of parliamentary colleagues and their acolytes".

After the crash of Barings in 1995, Garel-Jones, as MP for the rogue trader Nick Leeson, who had brought it about, urged Major to allow Leeson, then fighting extradition from Germany to Singapore, to come home and "make a clean breast of things". Major declined.

Garel-Jones himself joined UBS in 1993 as an industrial adviser. From 1999 he was managing director of Warburg Dillon Read, subsequently the UBS Investment Bank. He was a vice chairman of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group.

Lord Garel-Jones is survived by his wife Catalina and by their four sons and a daughter.

**Lord Garel-Jones, born February 28 1941, died March 23 2020**