

Register

Harold Elletson

Quirky Conservative MP for Blackpool North who allegedly acted as an MI6 agent while sitting in the House of Commons

Harold Elletson's five years as a Conservative MP in the 1990s were memorable for several reasons. He was a brilliant mimic who liked to trick backbench colleagues by impersonating ministers on the telephone. He once cast a vote while dressed in an England football shirt during the 1996 European championships. And he was famously accused of acting as an agent for MI6.

Then, as later, Elletson led a rather mysterious life. He was a polymath who had extensive business interests in Russia and eastern Europe, and advised multinationals such as BP and Rothmans, the tobacco giant, on doing business there.

For reasons that were never clear, he also defended Slobodan Milosevic, the Serbian president during the Balkan wars who was posthumously convicted of war crimes. He visited Belgrade four times during the early 1990s and once described Margaret Thatcher's support for military action against the Serbs as "beneath contempt".

But then, in 1996, The Observer ran a front-page story claiming he was secretly assisting MI6 by passing them information about the former Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia and eastern Europe. Specifically, he had told the intelligence service that Milosevic's regime had covertly channelled donations to the Conservative Party before the 1992 general election in an attempt to gain political support.

Elletson denied assisting MI6 (although it would not have been illegal), calling it "schoolboy fiction". His political colleagues suspected it was true, as

did his younger brother, Chandos, a cookery writer. "It fits," he said after pointing out that their father had been an intelligence officer during the war. "I asked him about it often, and he just smiled at me."

Harold Daniel Hope Elletson was born in Blackpool in 1960, the older son of Coral and Daniel, a lawyer and country squire who owned Parrox Hall, an Elizabethan manor house in Pree-sall, Lancashire, and an estate of several hundred acres on the edge of Morecambe Bay. He was educated at the Dragon School in Oxford, followed by Eton, from which he courted expulsion by campaigning to have the uniform

His sense of humour made him a favourite of Betty Boothroyd

banned. He studied Russian at Exeter University, earning a 2:1 and spending part of his course at Voronezh State University in central Russia. That triggered a lifelong interest in Russia and eastern Europe.

His other passion was politics, having been brought up in a house to which senior Tory figures such as Lord Hailsham and Lord Boyd-Carpenter were regular visitors. His father died when he was 23, and he won the ensuing by-election in order to inherit his seat on Lancashire county council.

In 1987 Elletson married Fiona Ferguson. They had two sons: Alexander, a sanctions adviser to a major bank; and



Elletson had business links to Russia

George, an English language teacher. The couple divorced in 2007.

In 1987 he fought Burnley for the Conservatives in the general election, losing to Labour by 7,557 votes. He then became business manager in the Soviet Union for Illingworth Morris, a Yorkshire textile company controlled by Alan Lewis, a big Conservative Party fundraiser.

In 1992 he fought and won Blackpool North for the Conservatives. Elletson was a popular member of parliament, with a keen sense of humour and dislike of pomposity. He was a favourite of Betty Boothroyd, then the Speaker, who would invite him to dinner parties to entertain guests with his impersonations of leading politicians.

He threw parties of his own for his political friends at Parrox Hall during Conservative Party conferences in Blackpool. A lover of outdoor activities, he kayaked from London to Blackpool

by river and sea, and walked from coast to coast to raise money for charity.

A moderate, pro-European Conservative, he was appointed parliamentary private secretary to Michael Ancram, then a Northern Ireland minister; but was swept from office by the New Labour landslide of 1997. He lost his slightly redrawn constituency to Labour's Joan Humble by nearly 9,000 votes.

He took his defeat badly, but as a proud Lancastrian he declined to seek a safer seat elsewhere in the country. Twice he failed to persuade the Blackpool North & Fleetwood constituency association to reselect him as its parliamentary candidate.

In 2002 he defected to the Liberal Democrats, claiming the Tories under Iain Duncan Smith had rejected his brand of liberal Conservatism and were no longer a credible party. The proximate cause was Duncan Smith's opposition to gay people adopting children.

Still searching for a route back into politics, in 2014 he launched a pressure group called the Campaign for the North, which sought to unite the traditional counties of Northumberland, Durham, Yorkshire, Lancashire, Westmorland and Cumbria into a semi-autonomous region with devolved powers similar to those of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The following year he co-founded the Northern Party and ran as its parliamentary candidate in Lancaster & Fleetwood in the 2015 general election. He promised to "kick the established parties in the ballot box," but his candidacy secured a mere 174 votes.

After his brief stint in parliament he

took on consultancies for companies operating in eastern Europe and Azerbaijan. He was also a lieutenant colonel in the army reserve and would occasionally brief ministers and commanders on developments in Russia and elsewhere.

Elletson wrote a biography of General Alexander Lebed, the Russian "strongman" who had challenged Boris Yeltsin for the presidency in 1996; several reviewers deemed it unduly sympathetic. He obtained a PhD in modern European studies from Bradford University and was studying for a law degree at Manchester Metropolitan University at the time of his death.

Over the past two decades he spent much time in Berlin with his partner, Rebecca Stromeyer, a German-Austrian businesswoman, with whom he promoted e-learning in Africa.

Maintaining his beloved Parrox Hall was his other preoccupation. He opened the grade II* listed building to the public, and, having no airs or graces, would show tour groups around himself.

He hosted charitable fundraisers there and rented it out for events, ranging from farmers' markets to a three-day naturalists' convention called Nudetest. Elletson was not above a little nudity himself. Not long ago a farmer on the estate arrived to pay his rent and found him mowing the lawn behind the house stark naked.

Harold Elletson, former Conservative MP, was born on December 8, 1960. He died of a pulmonary embolism on June 23, 2023, aged 62.

Daniil McCartney at Hotel Bel-Air on the Côte d'Azur

During the war their father, a girls'. And later I heard that the fellow