

The JC interview: Leon Brittan

Out of the mafia

Jenni Frazer meets a deeply experienced politician, a Conservative Europhile, who recalls how his career had its roots in his time at university amid a like-minded crowd

It is an odd reflection that, if the voters of the London Borough of Brent had been a bit more enthusiastic, Britain might have lost one of its most adroit politicians. Leon Brittan — Baron Brittan of Spennithorne, to give him his proper title — held three senior Cabinet positions in the 1980s and then became first a commissioner and subsequently vice-president of the European Commission. But once, before he became an MP, Brittan stood unsuccessfully for Brent Council. Why, he could have been Mayor of London by now.

None of this seems to trouble a tanned and relaxed Brittan as he strides through the corridors of the UBS Investment Bank in the City, where he is vice-chairman. His job entails an immense amount of travel, frequently to the Far East and, of course, all over Europe. Given the travelling, and his weekends at his North Yorkshire second home, it is quite an achievement to pin him down to a meeting in London.

Brittan always seemed one of our more diffident government members, frequently looking ill at ease on television. Perhaps he didn't buy wholesale into Thatcherite ideology. Certainly, in recent years, the Conservative Party's deprecation of the European project has found little favour with the cerebral Brittan. With some optimism, he voices the opinion that Europe is unlikely to be at the forefront of issues which will decide this general election.

But, even though he has been out of government for nearly 20 years, Brittan is still cautious, and treads carefully when asked about his old friend Michael Howard. "Michael has been kind enough to ring me," he says, but dismisses any suggestion that he might be acting as a consultant to the Conservative leader. "You have to do what you think is right," Brittan says, referring to Howard's controversial stance on immigration, "and you mustn't let yourself be deflected by people throwing personal stuff at you."

Like Howard, Brittan is the child of immigrants — in his case, both his parents came from Lithuania, his father, a doctor, from Vilnius, his mother from Kovno. They came to London in 1927 and Sam, the economist, was born in 1933, Leon, the younger brother, in 1939.

I'd heard that Brittan — who is a cousin of another former Conservative Cabinet minister, Sir Malcolm Rifkin — executes a mean *maftir and haftorah*. "Well," he smiles, "I don't know about that, but I do say it every year on the first day of Rosh Hashanah at Chelsea Synagogue, where I belong." As a boy he went to synagogue in Cripplewood and at his own request, he tells me, he asked the headteacher of the cheder classes to teach him modern Hebrew. "I was interested and it seemed ridiculous just to be learning it as though it were just Latin or Greek. I've forgotten a lot but I can still get about in Israel." But since whenever he does go to Israel these days it is to talk business or politics, Brittan prefers to do that in English.

He was educated at Haberdashers' Aske's School and cheerfully admits that his youthful ambition changed from week to week. His father, he says, who might have wished one or both of his sons to follow him into medicine, put no pressure on either of them. In the event, the young Leon was only 16 when he won a scholarship to Trinity College, Cambridge, to read English. Though he stayed at school to take his A levels, he enjoyed a gap-year in Grenoble, to learn French, and America for a short time, as well as working at the Oxford University Press — "I thought I might go into publishing."

But Cambridge proved to be the flowering of Leon Brittan. After switching from English to law, in 1960 he became president of the Cambridge Union and toured America with a Cambridge debating team. Some of the most significant friendships of latter-day Conserva-

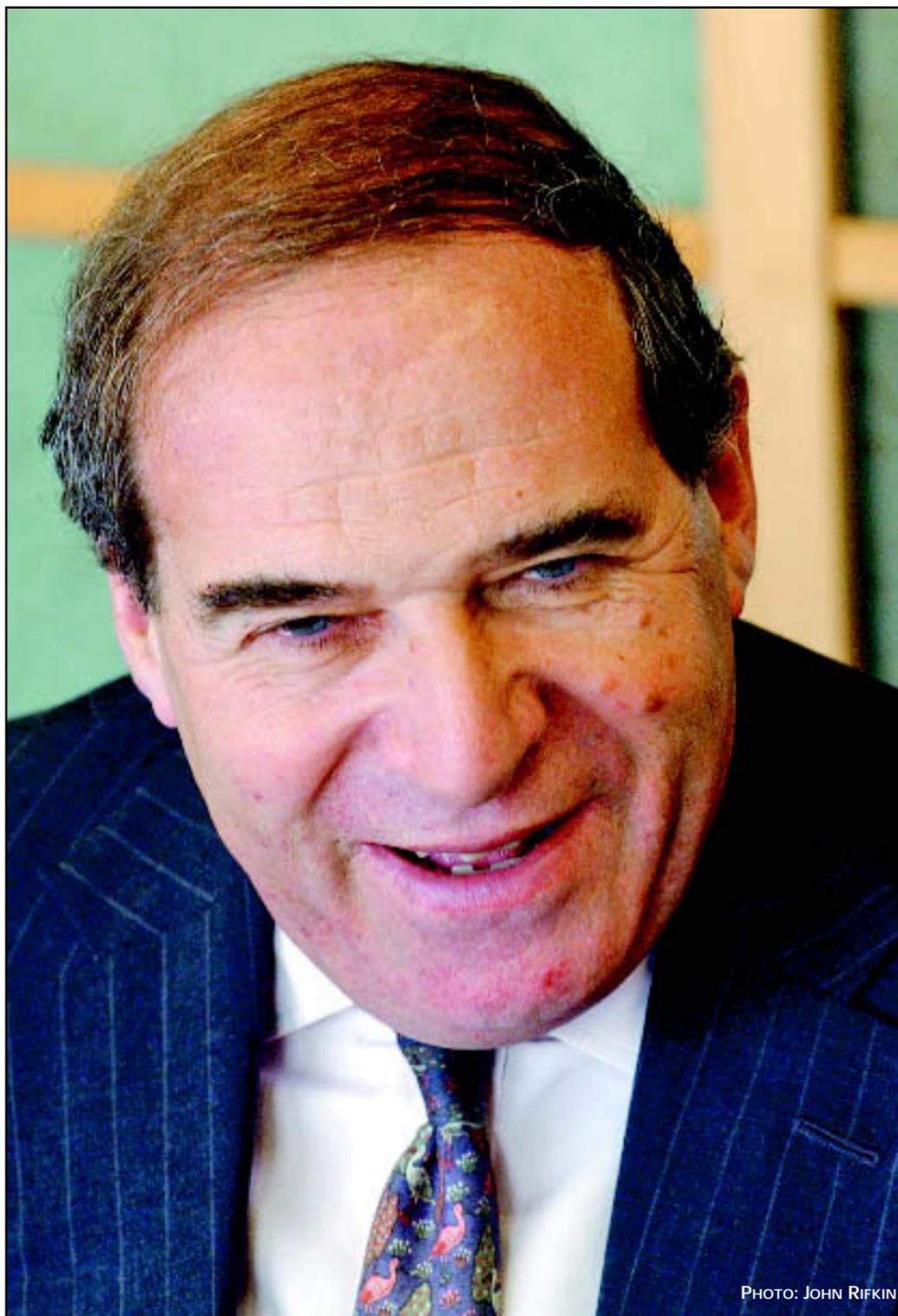


PHOTO: JOHN RIFKIN

tive politics were forged during his time at Trinity: his contemporaries included Ken Clarke, Norman Fowler, John Gummer, Norman Lamont and Michael Howard — sometimes referred to as the "Cambridge mafia."

"Michael left Cambridge two years after me. I remember vividly a meeting of the Cambridge Conservative Association on a Sunday afternoon where two people asked questions and I thought: 'these two guys are very sharp.' One was Michael and the other was Ken Clarke."

He and his friends, he says, knew that they were keen and eager to enter politics — "but we didn't think of ourselves as more keen than anyone else. It was only years later when I would look around the Cabinet and grin and think to myself, my goodness, all these people were members of the Conservative Association in Cambridge, at the same time."

Brittan was attracted to Conservatism, he says, by two main things: visiting America "and seeing that it was possible to have a country which seemed to be doing rather well, and was not socialist, and was not hidebound or class-bound; and then I read Anthony Crosland's

book, 'The Future of Socialism' — very influential at the time. It was in two parts: one, why traditional socialism didn't work — unions, nationalisation, etcetera, and two: what new socialism could be, the precursor, I suppose, of New Labour. I was persuaded by the first part and not by the second."

Although keen to enter Parliament, the pragmatic Brittan did not want to devote his entire life to trying to become an MP — "politics is a chancy, uncertain business." He went to the Bar which he thought would enable him to pursue his political ambitions as well. He entered a London chambers which specialised in defamation, and at the same time, was active in the Bow Group, the right-wing think tank of which he became chairman in 1964. The former MP Julian Critchley deftly defined the organisation as "a ladder up which the cleverer Tories can climb," and it wasn't long before Brittan found himself on a Conservative candidates' list and began looking for a seat.

In this post-Cambridge period, at some stage, Brittan met Margaret Thatcher. "I remember in 1960 Peter [later Lord] Thorneycroft speaking in Cambridge about the 1959 election, and saying that there were some very good new people, including a very good woman, Margaret Thatcher. I didn't really get to know her until I

was elected myself, in 1974." as MP for Cleveland and Whitby.

With Thatcher, Brittan claims, "you get what you see. Those who have not worked with her know as much as those who have. She's consistent. The mistake is to think that she never listened to anybody or always got her way."

Five years after entering Parliament, Brittan became Minister of State at the Home Office after a variety of shadow posts, first joining the Cabinet as chief secretary to the Treasury in 1981. Two years later, he was Home Secretary. In that same year, after boundary changes, he became MP for Richmond, North Yorks, a seat he retained until taking up his post in Brussels. (His last government post was as Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, in 1985 and 1986.)

Brittan plainly loved being Home Secretary, although he maintains that each of his jobs had its own charm.

"Home Office had drama: it involves handling issues which the public are bound to feel strongly about and which can flare up in a sudden way. The only thing to do was to have a positive, constructive agenda, with a robust framework, so that even if you were diverted by something, your positive agenda wouldn't be destroyed. I had, for example, the murder of WPC Fletcher [outside the Libyan Embassy] and the miners' strike, which, to put it mildly, had criminal-law implications."

He retains an interest in the decisions made by his successors, particularly over the issues of immigration and asylum. "I am not in favour of abandoning the [European Convention]. I think it would be an unfortunate signal to give. We need immigrants... but I think we should decide the criteria, the pace at which people come, the basis on which they come. If people seek asylum and are not entitled to it, that is a form of cheating, and makes it more difficult for the people who are entitled."

Diana, Brittan's wife, who is not Jewish, famously denounced some of his critics while he was in office, suggesting that there was anti-Semitism behind some of the attacks. Brittan is not so sure: his wife, he demurs, must speak for herself, and while he "is not naive, and people can say things behind one's back, I never felt anti-Semitism. When I was standing for Cleveland and Whitby, which was a very rural seat and in which I had never set foot in before, it was a seat which we had to win. I was interviewed, and someone said, not in a hostile way: 'Well, here we are in this constituency, here's this London barrister who is Jewish — is he the right person

for us to choose?' To which someone else said: 'Well, we're not choosing a parson, are we?' I regard both remarks as wholly healthy."

Though he didn't wear his Judaism on his sleeve and wasn't active in Jewish organisations during his time in government, there was, he says, "never any question or doubt about it. It matters to me to be Jewish." He has recently agreed, at the invitation of Dame Vivienne Duffield, to join the steering committee of the proposed London Jewish Community Centre. "It seemed to me a good idea. The jury's still out as to whether it will work, but the American experience is positive, and there are lots of people who would be interested in associating themselves with something broadly based."

A committed Europhile, he is gamely optimistic about the chances of the rest of the Conservative Party eventually coming round to his way of thinking. "Not yet. The best that we can hope for is that Europe is not an issue in this election. It does look as if it suits all parties not to focus on Europe. After the election, obviously, it will become an issue once again, not least because if Labour does win, they're committed to a referendum." While he won't predict an election outcome, he smiles: "I do think the Conservatives will do much better. But how much better is a fool's game to guess."