Brian Harrison

Tory MP for Maldon who in the Cold War years favoured British industry moving to his native Australia.

The only Australian in the House of Commons during the period of his tenure of the Maldon parliamentary seat from 1955 to 1974, Alastair Brian Clarke Harrison was associated with campaigns on two major environmental issues which affected that country – the establishment of the Bradwell nuclear power station on the River Thames, of which he was in favour, and a third London airport for Maplin on the Thames estuary, which he was also instrumental in restricting the sale and use of airspace by young people in a manner which became law in 1962 at his second attempt.

During the tense years of the Cold War he was perhaps best known for propounding the novel idea that the UK should relocate a large proportion of its manufacturing industry to Australia, so that in the event of a nuclear war “knocking out” Britain, the country’s industries would live on in these Antipodean offshoots. He always de- plored the fact that in the end it was General Motors in the United States and not any of Britain’s car manufactur- ers who seized the opportunity to plot the Australian car market. He also helped to defeat a tightening of immigration rules affecting Australia.

Harrison frequently spoke in Parlia- ment and wrote to the newspapers about what he saw as the parlous state of Britain’s defences, and the unrealis- tic nature of so much of its procure- ment programmes in a climate of rapidly evolving weapons delivery systems. He had come to England to the Uni- versity of Cambridge after the war dur- ing which time he inherited a stately home in Essex from a distant relation. This came with 175 acres of farmland and he subsequently settled in the coun- try to farm it, in the process expanding his holdings to 1,650 acres.

Alastair Brian Clark Harrison was born in Melbourne in 1921. His father, a brigadier, had represented the town of Maldon, Victoria (famous for its part in the Australian gold rush of the 19th century), in the state legislature. He was educated at Geelong Grammar School from which he joined the Aus- tralian Army in 1940. He later volun- teered for the Australian Independent Companies (part of the Indian Army) and served with them on operations against Japanese bases on the island of Halmahera in the Maluku archipelago in the Dutch East Indies, and in Borneo.

Demobilised as a captain, he next came to England to read a degree at Trinity College, Cambridge, and it was there that he learnt that through the death of a distant kinsman’s widow he had become the owner of Copford Hall near Colchester. Once a manor held by the bishops of London, its beautiful grounds are described in Pevsner as “al- most the boué ideal of what to the for- eigner is an English landscape scene”.

The line of descent to Harrison was from Hezekiah Haynes, who had inherited the estate of Copford Hall, dying in 1693.

Harrison decided to settle in Essex and make a go of Copford and its farm- land. In his last year at Cambridge he had rowed in the 1948 Boat Race, which Cambridge won in the record time of 17 minutes and five seconds. It was a record that stood until 1976 when Oxford won in 16min58sec.

In 1953 Harrison stood in the Con- servative interest for the Essex consti- tuiency of Maldon, then a Labour- held seat, defeating the Labour candi- date Lynton Scutt by 550 votes. He was to hold it with comfortable though never large, majorities, until he stood down at the first of the two general elections of 1974.

In that time he was parliamentary private secretary successively to the Minister of State, Colonial Office, 1955–56; Secretary of State for War, 1956–58—a period which included the military intervention at Suez and Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, 1958–60. On each occasion he served under John Hare (later 1st Viscount Blakenham), who had asked for him when at the Colonial Office and retained his services as he moved up the ministerial ladder.

As a constituency MP Harrison clashed with Tom Driberg (who had been Labour MP for Maldon and lived at Bradwell-on-Sea) over his support for the Bradwell nuclear power station. But his most vigorous campaign was to be that against a third London airport at Maplin Sands. In the end he felt he could not reconcile the work re- quired to conduct this campaign with his business interests and announced his retirement from Parliament in 1974.

At this time he was developing farm- ing and banking interests in Western Australia and in the 1980s he organised expeditions with the University of Western Australia to Nepal to study human physiology.

Harrison was appointed High Sher- iff of Essex in 1979 and a deputy lieuten- ant of the county the following year. He married, in 1952, Elizabeth Hood Hardie of Oakland’s, New South Wales. They had a son and daughter.

Brian Harrison, businessman and Conservative MP for Maldon, 1955–February 1974, was born on October 3, 1921. He died on August 21, 2011, aged 89.

Norman Aspin

Diplomat who helped to negotiate the foundation of Zimbabwe in a career devoted to East and Central Africa.

Norman Aspin, who ended his Diplo- matic Service career as a senior mentor of the team that oversaw the return to legality of the relative state of Rhodesia and its transition to the independent state of Zimbabwe, devoted the best part of his 32 years in public service to the affairs of East and Central Africa.

Norman Aspin was born in 1922 in Lancashire and educated at Darwen Grammar School, in 1940 at the age of 18 he joined the Durham University, where he began to study zoology, later he went to Oxford University and became later Archbishop of Canterbury. He spent the war years at sea as a lieutenant in the Royal Navy and later in the Royal Australian Navy, where he shifted his academic interest to geography. In 1948 he joined the Commonwealth Relations Office.

In his early years he saw service in Bombay and London, and in the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland—an enterprise intended, unsuccessfully as it turned out, to accommodate the different characteristics and interests of black and white in Northern and Southern Rhodesia and in Nyasaland. After a two-year secondment to the Treasury in London, Aspin returned to Africa in 1961. Three years earlier, Harold Macmillan had spoken of a wind of change blowing through Briti- ain’s African colonies. Aspin went as deputy to the High Commissioner to Sierra Leone. He stayed in Freetown for two happy years.

Returning to London in 1963 Aspin was promoted and given responsibility at departmental level for dealings with the East African Commonwealth coun- tries. In 1965, however, Britain’s For- eign and Commonwealth Services were being amalgamated. Cross-fertil- isation was needed and Aspin was one of the first mid-level Common- wealth Office staff to be posted to a For- eign Office mission. He went as deputy to the Ambassador to Israel, the only non-Commonwealth country in which he was to see service during his career.

Events made the overseas posting to which Aspin looked back as the most satisfying of his career. The 1967 Middle East war brought crisis to Israel, followed by swift and dramatic victory. Aspin took charge of the evacu- ation of British women and children to Cyprus, and the judgment and energy he displayed were recognised by his ap- pointment as CMG the next year. He was rewarded also with a sabbatical year at the Imperial Defence College in London, followed by a stint in the Diplo- matic Service’s administration and three years back on East African affairs. This time at under-secretary level.

In 1976 Aspin was appointed High Commissioner to Malta. A programme of withdrawal of British Forces from their bases in Malta raised tricky administrative and financial issues. The Prime Minister of Malta, Dom Mintoff, was instinctively antipathetic to the British, but Aspin made his way success- fully through the administrative and political undergrowth.

In 1979 Aspin returned to the For- eign and Commonwealth Office to take overall charge of Britain’s dealings with Central and East Africa. In Decem- ber of that year the Lancaster House agreement was signed, bringing the rebel British colony of Rhodesia back into submission to the Crown and look- ing forward to a new and independent republic of Zimbabwe within the Com- monwealth. It marked a natural culmi- nation of Aspin’s career in Common- wealth Africa, and he retired in 1980. He is survived by his wife, Elizabeth, and three sons.

Norman Aspin, CMG, diplomat, was born on November 11, 1922. He died on July 25, 2011, aged 88.