

Rigorous MoD planner, thinktank analyst and Liberal Democrat defence spokesman - and Patron of the UK Defence Forum

Jonathan Fryer The Guardian, Tuesday 14 August 2007 Article history

Defence analysts are rarely gifted with the ability to expound their views in terms accessible to the general public, but Tim Garden, who has died from cancer at the age of 63, was a notable exception. Following the US-led invasion of Iraq, he became the pundit of preference for a number of TV and radio stations at home and abroad, as well as a regular commentator both in newspapers and online. Charles Kennedy, then leading the Liberal Democrats and coming under heavy fire from both Labour and Conservative MPs for his opposition to the launching of the Iraq war, shrewdly nominated Tim for the House of Lords, where he took his seat as Baron Garden of Hampstead in 2004. The party thus gained a significant voice which was listened to with respect and attention.

Long before entering politics, Tim had in fact established himself on both sides of the Atlantic as an authority on security issues and international relations, not least when he was director of the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) in London during 1997-98, and as a visiting professor at King's College London and Indiana University.

Tim was born in Worcester and attended King's school in that city. His father was an electrical engineer and Tim was the first member of the family to go to university. He read physics at St Catherine's College, Oxford (which later made him an honorary fellow), demonstrating an early love of flying by being a member of the Oxford University Air Squadron. In his second year, he met a fellow undergraduate, Susan Button, who became his wife after graduation, when they were both aged 21. By then Tim had joined the RAF, but he realised only a fortnight before the wedding that he should have obtained his commanding officer's permission before making the arrangements. The officer concerned was not amused.

Tim flew Canberra light bombers in Germany before becoming a flying instructor on Jet Provosts. Later, he commanded a jet flying training unit, a Vulcan bomber squadron (responsible for delivering Britain's nuclear deterrent in those pre-Trident days) and a helicopter base.

In the early 1980s, he took time out from active service to do a postgraduate degree in international relations at Magdalene College, Cambridge. Some air force colleagues viewed all this university education as suspect, but it enabled him to go on to become director of defence studies for the RAF, lecturing on strategic studies in the UK and internationally, and writing his book *Can Deterrence Last?* (1984). From 1985 to 1987, he was station commander at RAF Odiham in Hampshire, where he flew Chinook helicopters and the Aerospatiale Puma.

The next six years were spent working in the Ministry of Defence in London, including a period as assistant chief of the air staff. He published a second book at this time - *The Technology Trap: Science and the Military* (1989). His final appointment at the MoD was as assistant chief of the defence staff (programmes), a role that gave him responsibility for long-term planning for all three armed services, about which he developed forthright opinions.

After a period as commander of the Royal College of Defence Studies, he retired from the air force in 1996, with the rank of air marshal (and a knighthood, awarded in 1994). As one of his colleagues later commented, "Tim had to leave the air force early, as the service wasn't big enough for him." Tim had other interests to pursue. Having become fascinated by computing, he set himself up as a website consultant, before taking over at Chatham House. His own website and weblog on foreign and security issues developed into something he specially valued.

The worlds of thinktanks and academe offered a more diverse and sometimes more stimulating arena for social interaction and debate, though Tim always enjoyed tackling some of his more reactionary fellow servicemen head on. He caused a stir at one Fleet Air Arm annual Taranto/Falklands dinner after his retirement, when he expounded loudly on the benefits of immigration, silencing one red-faced diner with the parry, "Besides, who's going to pay for your pension?"

He could be a stimulating companion at the big table at the predominantly conservative Beefsteak Club, of which he was a member, as well as the more predictable National Liberal Club. He was truly a man of many parts.

When Tim first became involved with the Liberal Democrats early in the new millennium, both locally in Camden and nationally, many people wrongly assumed that because of his military background, he would be on the conservative wing of the party, whereas actually he was an impassioned radical - a Guardian-reading member of the Fabian Society, with a taste for bright red ties.

Though intellectually rigorous, he was immensely gregarious. Even after his elevation to the peerage, he would bounce up to strangers and say, "Hi! I'm Tim Garden!" He found some of the formality of the upper house disconcerting, declaring that people's reluctance to use first names there made him feel like he was back at school.

His informality helped make him popular with Americans, though he was sometimes highly critical of what he openly called the "hyper-power". For a while, he also questioned whether Nato should continue to exist. He was a firm advocate of European integration and of a proper European security and armaments policy, in recognition of which President Chirac appointed him a Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur in 2003.

Tim was not just a keen European, but a true internationalist. For the final three years of his life, he was president of the British group of Liberal International, in which capacity he chaired a packed and emotional fringe meeting on Israel/Palestine at last September's Liberal Democrat conference in Brighton, keeping a cool head when some present were losing theirs.

He maintained a deep interest in the Middle East and was a member of the Anglo-Jordanian Society. In 2000, he advised the Palestinian Authority on negotiations with Israel, under the auspices of the Adam Smith Institute. But his fairness and integrity meant that he was respected on all sides in that tortuous situation, and he got a warm reception when he supported his wife Sue when she stood as LibDem parliamentary candidate in the 2005 general election in Finchley and Golders Green, which has one of the largest Jewish populations in Britain.

The party soon understood what an asset they had acquired in Tim. He became a key figure in the parliamentary foreign affairs team, and got elected to several party committees and policy working groups. All the while, he continued to write articles prolifically, to travel giving lectures, and to be interviewed any time there was a major development in Iraq or Afghanistan, or when the issue of replacing Trident came to the fore.

Earlier this year, he started to feel tired, but a hospital check-up revealed that the problem was

not exhaustion, but pancreatic cancer, which was rapidly spreading to other organs. He remained in hospital for about a fortnight, before returning home to spend his final weeks in the care of his family. He is survived by Sue and his two daughters.

Richard Norton-Taylor writes: Tim Garden was the epitome of the - not so new - generation of high-ranking military figures who belied a commonly held presumption that they had a one-dimensional, even blinkered, approach to the world around them.

He would always ask the right questions, which the government would invariably sidestep, about the consequences of its defence and security policies, or its reluctance to confront urgent problems. But he never indulged in histrionics or partisan point-scoring for the sake of it. Far from it. Indeed, he was, in many ways, the ultimate, quietly spoken, rationalist. For a journalist writing on military, security, and foreign policy issues, and how they marry, or don't marry up, he was a trusted source and invaluable sounding board. You could always rely on him to point you in the right direction.

When I met him for the first time after he was appointed a Liberal Democrat spokesman on defence, he remarked that one of the things he had been told as a newcomer by elderly peers was that membership of the House of Lords added 10 years to your life. It is a tragedy that his membership there was cut so short. He will be seriously missed, in that place and much further afield.

· Timothy Garden, defence expert and Liberal Democrat peer, born April 23 1944; died August 9 2007