The return of the political salon

The cross-party Beaverbrook Forum, hosted by Jonathan Aitken, where ideas and wine flow freely, evokes the glory days of Tory idealism

Words: **Pepys**

Barkston Gardens, in leafy SW5, close to Earls Court, may not be within earshot of the House of Commons' division bells, like the Rev Jonathan Aitken's former Westminster townhouse on Lord North Street. But every few months, on a Thursday evening, the former Tory minister turned Anglican priest – the great-nephew of Canadian media magnate Lord Beaverbrook – has been hosting a soiree with his nephew, Max Aitken.

In this spacious, book-lined flat, the family pair welcome distinguished political guest speakers – next in line is Michael Gove, Conservative peer and editor of the *Spectator* – and a cross-party group of MPs, special advisers, political writers and business figures.

This, then, is the Beaverbrook Forum, an informal gathering that is now over a year old and whose success and demand for invitations suggest that the political salon – where ideas can be freely discussed, helped with a glass of wine and a buffet supper – is making a comeback.

On 9 July, during the heatwave, with guests in shirtsleeves, the two Aitkens hosted their second speaker since the forum was founded in 2025. At that event, the historian Lord Roberts of Belgravia addressed the group on "What a reincarnated Churchill is telling me about today's world".

Last November, the salon was addressed by Lord (Daniel) Hannan of Kingsclere who, against a background of US tariffs being imposed on Europe, spoke about "The future of free trade in the era of President Trump".

The testy debate that followed drew questions and comments from a wide range of political thinkers and MPs, from Diane Abbott to the Conservative former digital minister Damian Collins.

Hannan's talk was introduced by Max Aitken, a clean-energy business leader, who made the case that the Western economic system faces its "sternest test" in a generation. Protectionism is back, alliances are being redrawn and long-settled assumptions about how the world works are being shattered. "Lord Hannan has long questioned received wisdom and often proved prescient", the invitation promised, and guests were not disappointed, as a volley of "challenges" to Hannan's free-trade theory followed the talk.

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The purpose of the Beaverbrook Forum is to encourage "discussion, networking and friendships" in the areas of public interest, championed by Lord Beaverbrook, the Canadian media owner and business tycoon William Maxwell Aitken, 1st Baron Beaverbrook, who died in 1964.

"It continues the tradition of our forebear, a politician and publisher who relished strong disagreement well argued," says Jonathan. "In his spirit of stirring up mischief and giving good parties, we bring together leaders from politics, business, media and academia, across parties and professions, to test ideas robustly, civilly and in good company."

In an introduction to the forum, guests are reminded that Lord Beaverbrook understood moments of great peril. "Max and his great friend Churchill were the only men to serve in cabinet in both World Wars.

As Minister for Aircraft Production, he delivered the Spitfires that saved Britain in 1940. A vocal champion of free trade, he was an early Eurosceptic, pushed for women's rights and Canadian economic independence from the United States – causes that remain strikingly relevant today".

Invited guests are sent instructions for the salon, which begins at 6.30pm for 7.00pm with "Arrival & drinks". At 7.00pm there is the "Address followed by challenges". At 8.15pm, "Supper & discussion", with guests then encouraged by uniformed staff to leave by 9.30pm, though many stay later.

Note use of the word "challenges" rather than questions. The heated debate that the forum has witnessed in just a few meetings is entirely intentional. It is a throwback to the days when Jonathan Aitken, Sir Hugh Fraser – who stood for Tory leader in 1979 – and Roger Scruton would host Margaret Thatcher, journalist Paul Johnson and even Richard Nixon (four times) at the famed Conservative Philosophy Group, first at Fraser's house at 52 Cavendish Square and then later in Aitken's Westminster townhouse, a short walk from the Commons.

In an age where MPs, special advisers, think-tank bosses and journalists exchange information on WhatsApp groups, the idea of the Beaverbrook Forum is to make political debate and discourse fun, engaging and social again.

There are no paper plates or plastic knives at supper. Instead expect smart cutlery, homemade cottage pie, cheese boards, light puddings, Louis Latour Mâcon white and champagne.

"To not simply converse digitally is rather refreshing," Jonathan tells me. "You start to remember that politicians are human. You actually meet people. Look at them in the eye. You can enjoy a glass of wine with them. There's laughter and real discussion."

The idea for the Beaverbrook Forum came about almost by accident, when Max and Jonathan were having lunch at White's.

"I was talking too much, as I often do, about the good old days, and I said, 'What a pity there aren't things like the Conservative

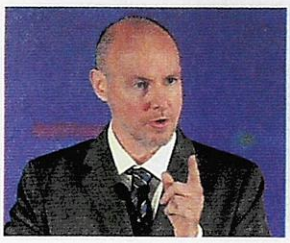
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Max Aitken: below (clockwise from top left): Margaret Thatcher, Lord Beaverbrook, Michael Gove, Sir Hugh Fraser, Lady Antonia Fraser and Jonathan Aitken in 1970, Daniel Hannan

Philosophy Group around today, because people discussed ideas, and you met new people.' And Max said, 'Let's do something based around Lord Beaverbrook.' And I thought, well, why not?"

One thing that is different about the Beaverbrook Forum is that it is more cross-party than the highly Tory CPG. The group began in 1975 after Sir Hugh Fraser failed in his bid to be Tory leader, receiving just 16 votes. But young MPs like Aitken and thinkers such as Roger Scruton and Dr John Casey considered Fraser's ideas fresher and intellectually more robust than the other Tory leadership candidates – including Edward Heath and Thatcher – so they decided to form a discussion group to keep the flames burning.

But when it started up in 1975, the Tory's chief whip Airey Neave – who had escaped from Colditz during the Second World War – had suspicions that the group was meeting in secret as a "splinter group" to keep up support for Fraser against Thatcher.

When challenged on this, Aitken said that the group's motivations were the very opposite. As Charles Moore wrote in his biography of Thatcher, "the purpose of the CPG was to generate new ideas for the party, not to open old wounds".

After assuring Neave that the CPG was founded as a discussion group to create an intellectual basis for conservatism, his tone changed, and not long after, Aitken was approached by Neave who "rather sheepishly" asked if the new Tory leader, Margaret Thatcher, "could be invited to join your group".

Thatcher attended many times and Aitken says that he would like to invite Kemi Badenoch to attend his SW5 soirée and address his eclectic group.

Aitken makes the point that Thatcher had few friends outside of her small political circle and that the CPG offered an entrée to a more glamorous, worldly and intellectual group. Heavyweight CPG guests included Ulster Unionist MP Enoch Powell, Robert Blake, Frederick Hayek, Michael Oakeshott, Milton Friedman, Hugh Thomas, Perry Worsthorne and Paul Johnson, who became one of her closest advisers.

Many of this group received peerages from Thatcher, a testament to how much the first female prime minister seemed to enjoy her visits to the CPG gatherings.

She was known to make combative comments and interjections, notably when Edward Norman, the dean of Peterhouse, Cambridge, gave a paper on nuclear weapons, and Thatcher interrupted, shouting out: "I agree with Dr Norman. We must defend Christian values with the atom bomb."

Perhaps Kemi Badenoch will show up one Thursday evening to address the denizens of SW5. But one thing's for sure: the DNA of the Beaverbrook Forum lies in the Conservative Philosophy Group, which became an important political salon for Thatcher and helped form the moral and intellectual backbone of her later policies and ideas.

Even if Barkston Gardens is a few miles from the division bells, the return of the political salon is most welcome.