

## How to win friends and influence people, the Soros way

By Sholto Byrnes



*Billionaire George Soros has supported political campaigns from the UK, to Hungary to Malaysia / AFP*

George Soros is at it again. The billionaire American financier famous – or more properly, infamous – for "breaking the Bank of England" in 1992 is under attack for contributing nearly \$1 million to the campaign to water down or reverse Brexit. This, according to the former Conservative leader Iain Duncan Smith, constitutes "interfering in the British political system" and an attempt "to undermine the democratic process". The *Daily Mail* newspaper has described Mr Soros's money as "tainted" and others who have joined the attack include the former chancellor Lord Norman Lamont.

This is significant. For the controversy over the funding provided by Mr Soros and his Open Society Foundations has previously centred on Hungary, whose leader Viktor Orban has furiously denounced foreign-backed NGOs and Mr Soros for trying to interfere in this year's elections. As Mr Orban is generally considered somewhat beyond the pale, his attacks have been discounted.

But Lord Lamont and Mr Duncan Smith are no wild outliers. They have both held high office under internationally respected prime ministers. Their criticisms count. And other governments around the world, from Romania to Malaysia, might feel vindicated in their objections to what they see as Mr Soros's meddling in their internal affairs.

Funding of political movements by the unelected super-wealthy can be problematic, even when the benefactors are citizens of the country involved. One thinks of the Las Vegas casino tycoon Sheldon Adelson, who appears to demand unflinching obeisance to Israel from any Republican candidates hoping to gain his favour.

The influence of benefactors such as Mr Adelson has consequences. For too often in American politics, the overriding question about aspiring candidates has seemed to be not what they can do for America and its standing in the world but what they can do to please a few wealthy people.

A scandal in which it was alleged that right wing French politicians were given bundles of cash at the home of Ingrid Bettencourt, the elderly L'Oreal heiress, shook the foundations of Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency (Mr Sarkozy was eventually cleared but one of his ministers resigned). Even the UK had its own "cash for peerages" investigation, during which the then prime minister Tony Blair was interviewed three times. Nobody was charged but there remains question marks over some of those

who have donated large sums to major parties and the individuals who have been selected to sit in the House of Lords.

It is equally troublesome when foreigners seek to intervene in the political processes of other countries. The natural reaction is to say: "What business is it of yours?" Half of America is already up in arms over the idea that Russia may have attempted to influence the result of the last presidential election. What if it turned out that a Russian or Chinese billionaire had actively been seeking to oust an incumbent governor or congressman? There would be absolute uproar.

This brings us back to Hungarian-born Mr Soros, who has been spared much scrutiny under the apprehension that his aims are philanthropic. In fact, they are highly partisan and are about imposing his world view on other countries. This is what led the leader of Romania's ruling party to denounce him for "financing evil". Mikheil Saakashvili, who became president of Georgia after the Soros-supported Rose Revolution, later said: "When he starts to play politics, he's not that good." In 2016, there was plenty of anger in Malaysia when leaked documents suggested a Soros plan to fund anti-government NGOs such as Bersih (which the latter eventually had to admit).

Last March, senator Mike Lee led a group of Republicans calling on Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to investigate how US funds were being used to "impress left-leaning policies on sovereign nations, regardless of their desire for self-determination." They specifically named "the George Soros-backed Open Society Foundations" and added that "this behaviour is unacceptable and must be halted immediately".

All of the above provides plenty of reason to find Mr Soros's interventions highly distasteful. But this is also a man who admits to having a Messiah complex, writing that: "I fancied myself as some kind of god".

He says that as a financial trader he indulged in "amoral activities" and could not and did not "look at the social consequences" of what he did – such as breaking the Bank of England (which cost UK taxpayers more than \$4 billion) or the devastation wrought by currency speculation during the 1997 east Asian financial crisis. He even replied, when asked if it was difficult helping in the confiscation of property from his fellow Jews as a child in the Second World War: "Not at all."

This, I would argue, is a man with no moral compass other than that set by his monumental self-belief. He is a deeply dangerous individual who should be exposed for what he is – no hero for the liberal society but someone who seeks to buy influence in democratic countries.

Martin Peretz, a former editor of the impeccably liberal US magazine, the *New Republic*, once posed this question to Hillary Clinton and Mr Obama, both of whom Mr Soros had said he would support in the past. "How, without any explanation or apology from him, will you take this man's money?"

It is a question that the recipients of his largesse, whether in London, Budapest or Kuala Lumpur, might well ponder. And they could well keep pondering for there is no adequate answer.

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