



The minister, the cardinal and the billionaire climate sceptic you've probably never heard of

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Rupert Murdoch and his influence on climate politics are front and centre of debate right now but there is a second, less well-known Australian billionaire operating from afar who has used his money and access to back conservative political causes. His name is Michael Hintze.

Hintze is a leading free marketeer and sceptic of the role of carbon emissions in climate change. He is a Liberal Party donor. He also has a long-running business relationship with Angus Taylor, Scott Morrison's minister in charge of emissions reduction. Hintze is also a conservative Catholic who has links to former prime minister Tony Abbott and now gaoled Cardinal George Pell, both of whom are climate change denialists — with Abbott trotting out his denialism at a conservative US think tank today.

Taylor's office denies that he has discussed climate issues with Hintze, while Abbott has declined to answer. Both though have led Coalition attacks on the idea of government support for renewable energy. Hintze has declined to say whether or not he has discussed climate policy with Taylor or Abbott. In emailed answers he told *Inq* he donates funds to parties he believes are “best for the country” and that “no influence is sought”.

So who is Michael Hintze?

A ‘political patron’

Sir Michael Hintze, GCSG, AM, is a spectacularly successful hedge fund owner. He operates from his adopted city of London, and has used his wealth to fund the Leave campaign and to shape Tory party Brexit politics and the rise of Boris Johnson.

Hintze has donated millions of pounds to the British Conservative Party, which ensured him access via an elite group of Tory donors called the Leaders Group. He was awarded a knighthood under UK prime minister David Cameron in 2013. Hintze is also a trustee of the powerful UK free market think tank, the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), which opposes government moves to tax sugary drinks and to introduce the plain packaging of cigarettes.

Through its trustees, the IEA has built an international coalition of free market organisations which includes the Washington-based Cato Institute, established by the leading US industrialist and libertarian Charles Koch. The IEA does not disclose where it gets its funding. However a

Greenpeace investigation revealed that Exxon Mobil was an IEA donor at the time Hintze took on his role as a trustee close to 15 years ago.

The international grouping of free market think tanks operates collectively, pursuing common goals under the banner of the Atlas Network and includes Australia's Institute of Public Affairs (IPA).

Hintze's activities as a "political patron", as he describes himself, are well known in the UK but less so in Australia. Yet he has an intriguing set of relationships with both Abbott and Pell.

The mad monk and the cardinal

Electoral commission records show that in 2013 Michael Hintze donated \$75,000 to Abbott's campaign. This was the year the Coalition gained power on a promise of removing the so-called carbon tax introduced by Labor and reviewing initiatives on renewable energy. Australia's IPA — a cousin to Hintze's London-based IEA — won recognition from the international grouping of think tanks for its campaign against the tax.

Hintze donated a further \$50,000 to the Liberal Party in the 2016 election .

In 2012, then-shadow treasurer Joe Hockey chose Hintze's IEA in London to deliver his infamous "Age of Entitlement" speech — a kind of tribute to the virtue of a free market economy and the need to get government out of the equation. It was no doubt music to Hintze's ears.

Once in power, the Abbott government appointed Hintze to an international panel advising on the 2014 Financial System Inquiry.

When Abbott lost the prime ministership, Hintze didn't stop supporting him. Far from it.

Abbott's parliamentary declaration of interests during his years as a backbencher show that Hintze, through his hedge fund company CQS, twice funded Abbott's overseas ventures. The first was for the Member for Warringah's accomodation in London for March 20-23, 2016. Later that year, in October, Hintze's company paid for Abbott's travel to New York and London, as well as accommodation and hospitality, prior to Abbott attending the UK Conservative Party conference as guest of *The Spectator* magazine.

Inq's estimate of Hintze's investment in Abbott on these trips alone is around \$15,000.

A year later, in October 2017, the Global Warming Policy Foundation — a UK climate sceptic organisation reportedly linked to Hintze and prominent Tory figures — paid for Abbott's flights, accommodation and transport when the former prime minister delivered his "Daring to Doubt" speech. It was in this speech that he infamously compared climate change activism to pagan rituals:

Environmentalism has managed to combine a post-socialist instinct for big government with a post-Christian nostalgia for making sacrifices in a good cause ... Primitive people once killed goats to appease the volcano gods. We're more sophisticated now but are still sacrificing our industries and our living standards to the climate gods to little more effect.

The Global Warming Policy Foundation does not reveal its funding sources, however newspaper reports have suggested that Hintze is one of them. Hintze has refused to confirm or deny that he

has funded the climate sceptic organisation, telling *Inq* that he doesn't comment on speculation. Hintze was reportedly a guest on the night of Abbott's speech.

In 2011, soon after it was established, the Global Warming Policy Foundation invited George Pell, then-archbishop of Sydney, to give the foundation's annual address. Though holding no scientific qualifications, Pell had begun to spread his wings as a climate change commentator.

It's not clear how Abbott, Pell and Hintze came to be in the same circles, but they share a common bond of conservative Catholicism. Hintze received the first of two papal knighthoods in 2005 when Pope Benedict XVI made him a commander of the Order of St Gregory. Hintze also funded the building of a new residential wing at Sydney University's catholic college, St John's College. Hintze, Abbott — and Joe Hockey — all attended St John's.

But Hintze's crowning achievement came in 2014 when he was recommended by Cardinal Pell to a board of experts to advise on the running of the Vatican Bank. This was after Pell had been brought to Rome to whip the Vatican's finances into shape.

Neither Hintze nor Abbott will comment on why Hintze continued to support the former PM in his role as as backbencher, but by 2017 it was clear that Abbott remained determined to get rid of prime minister Malcolm Turnbull. Abbott again reached for energy policy as his instrument of destruction. Angus Taylor, then. Turnbull's minister for law enforcement and cybersecurity became a willing ally.

Taylor declared that Turnbull's National Energy Guarantee did not reflect the values of the Liberal Party. In August 2018 he deserted Turnbull and became a numbers man for Peter Dutton in the Liberal Party leadership spills.

Having been integral to unseating Turnbull over energy policy, Taylor was placed in charge of energy policy and emissions reduction. He came to the role as an opponent of government support for wind turbines. Taylor had campaigned against wind-powered renewable energy — a move that gained him the unstinting support of 2GB's Alan Jones. As a management consultant, he had also worked on a Minerals Council of Australia project.

Yet less well known is that Taylor has also enjoyed a long-standing business relationship with Michael Hintze.

A growing relationship

Taylor's parliamentary declaration of interests records that he is a director of a private investment company, Gufee Pty Ltd, which holds shares in a company called Growth Farms. But that declaration doesn't begin to tell the full story.

Growth Farms is a farm management company which Angus Taylor and his brother, Richard Taylor, set up in 1999 to manage farms on behalf of owners — some living in capital cities or overseas — who needed the expertise of experienced managers. Growth Farms received a major boost when it picked up the business of Michael Hintze who, in 2007, began investing in Australian farmland through his company Michael Hintze Premium Farms.

A rural media profile of the Taylor brothers in 2015 reported that Growth Farms was managing 12 Hintze farms in eastern Australia and that, now elected to parliament, Angus Taylor was a "silent" shareholder in the company.

Richard Taylor took the lead in acquiring and managing Hintze's farm holdings on behalf of Growth Farms. According to the Hintze Premium Farms website, Taylor left Growth Farms in 2015 to become Hintze's full-time CEO and managing director. He is now chair of the board of Hintze's Premium Farms group which, according to its website, has bought up over 40 properties — more than 70,000 hectares — covering cattle, sheep and wheat farming in south-eastern Australia. It's a part of the country familiar to the Taylors, who were raised near the Snowy Mountains. Richard Taylor continues with Growth Farms as a non-executive director.

A spokesperson for Hintze Premium Farms has told *Inq*: "MH Premium Farms conducted a selection process some 12 years ago. The board (which did not and does not include Sir Michael) selected Growth Farms on the basis of merit and price. This selection process pre-dated Angus Taylor's being an MP by some seven years. MH Premium Farms ceased its relationship with Growth Farms over a year ago."

Taylor has declared none of this on his register of interests. Nor is he required to under rules introduced by the Hawke government in 1984; MPs only need to declare the known interests of their dependent children and their spouse — not their siblings.

Hintze's public position is that he "believes there is climate change" but he downplays the role of carbon dioxide emissions. "I believe it is highly likely that the increase in concentration of carbon dioxide (CO₂) is in part due to human activity over the past century and that it has been a cause of that warming," he says. "But the sole focus on CO₂ emissions is too narrow."

Inq has asked Angus Taylor what assurances he can give that there is no conflict of interest in his relationship with Hintze given Hintze's position on CO₂ emissions and Taylor's ministerial responsibilities for emissions reduction.

In an emailed response, Taylor's office denied that there was any conflict of interest. "As a private citizen Mr Hintze's views are his own. Minister Taylor fully accepts the science of climate change," the statement said.