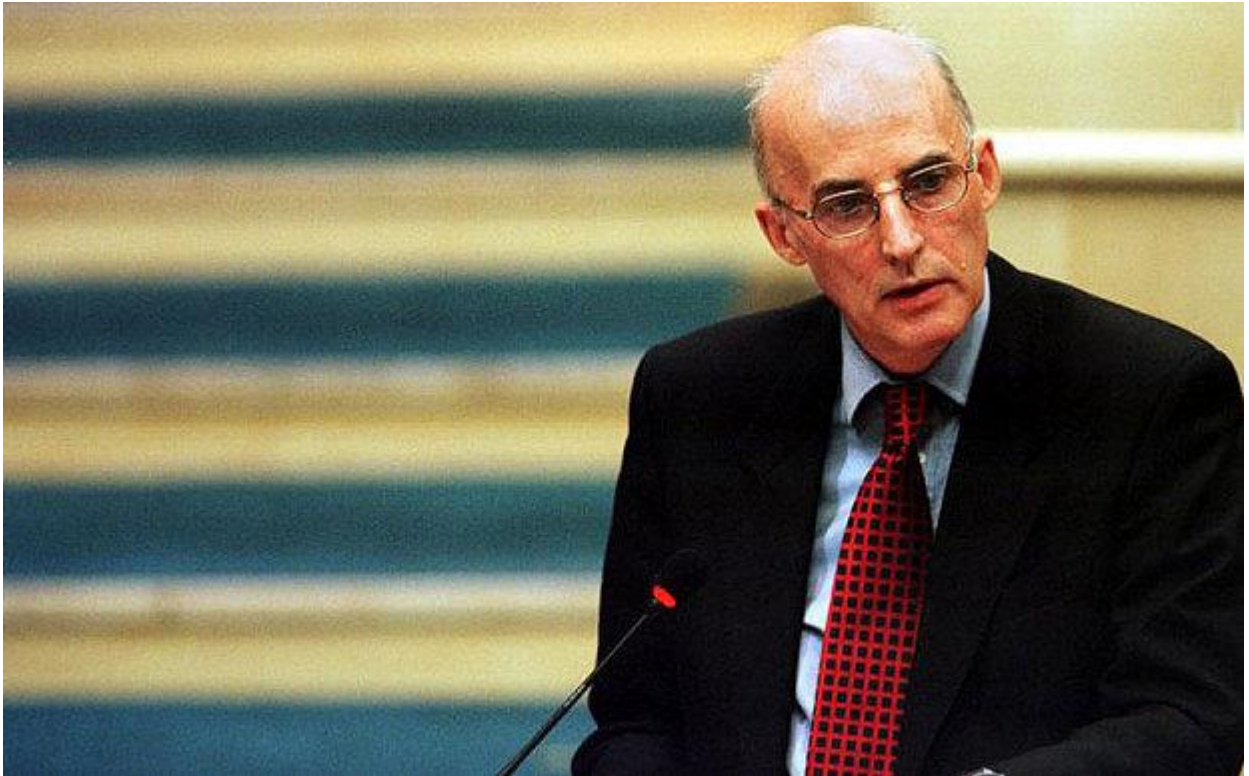


Sam Galbraith - obituary

The Telegraph

Sam Galbraith was a brain surgeon and Labour MP who survived a lung transplant to become an MSP and minister



Sam Galbraith, who has died aged 68, was a respected Glasgow brain surgeon who recovered from one of the first successful lung transplants — becoming the world’s longest surviving recipient — to serve as a Labour minister first at Westminster and later at Holyrood.

Thoughtful, articulate, principled and a leader by example, Galbraith was prized by Labour colleagues as a meritocrat with a personal commitment to improving central Scotland’s abysmal diet, public health and life expectancy. Though normally mild in conversation, he did not suffer fools gladly and caused a storm at Holyrood by accusing a Nationalist MSP of “talking bollocks”.

A keen mountaineer (he had led an expedition to the Himalayas), skier and runner and a non-smoker, Galbraith had the misfortune to develop fibrosing alveolitis, a rare genetic disease in which healthy lungs are overcome by fibrous tissue. When the condition — which also killed his sister — was diagnosed in 1987, he predicted he would die early in 1990.

That January, with doctors giving him days to live, he was called to the Freeman Hospital, Newcastle, for a transplant. At that time no facilities for the operation existed in Scotland. He was given a 50 per cent chance of surviving five years.

The transplant left him with half his lung capacity, and requiring a bagful of drugs to ward off rejection and more to counteract the side-effects of that medication. Recovery took 18 months, during which he campaigned successfully for a heart-and-lung transplant centre in Glasgow.

Galbraith came out of hospital convinced that consultants like himself subjected patients to too many unnecessary tests. "I used to think I understood," he said, "but you have to be a patient to understand what we put patients through."

From his experience as a brain surgeon treating punch-drunk boxers, he also became convinced that the professional sport should be banned. After Michael Watson's near-fatal injury in 1989 against Nigel Benn, he told the Commons: "If we cannot get it banned, the least we are entitled to demand is research that will lead to inescapable conclusions which nobody will be able to hide from."

After his election Galbraith kept his hand in as a surgeon, operating during the summer recess for several years until he felt advances in brain surgery were moving ahead of him. On a more basic level, he operated on his fellow minister Brian Wilson's thumb over dinner, forcing a heated paper clip through the nail to relieve a searing pain.

As a consultant, Galbraith was renowned for his altruism and lack of ego. He spurned private practice, and on receiving a sizeable pay increase in 1983 donated 10 per cent of it to the NHS. As head of Scottish Medical Aid to Nicaragua he raised £60,000 for a health centre there; he also found time to serve on the General Medical Council and the executive of the technological union ASTMS, and act as president of the Medical Practitioners' Union.



Scottish Secretary of State Donald Dewar and Health Minister Sam Galbraith in 1998

Galbraith earned respect from fellow MPs by refusing a request from Neil Kinnock to base himself in London. Marrying a young medical colleague in his 40s, he spent every possible moment with her and their three daughters, the eldest a babe-in-arms at the time of his transplant.

Forced to give up mountaineering, he headed whenever possible with his family for Strachur in Argyll, where they had a home. Every spring and autumn, Government chauffeurs gave their time to travel from Glasgow to launch and beach his small boat for him.

Samuel Laird Galbraith was born on October 18 1945, the son of a schoolmaster, and brought up in Greenock, which — by an irony that he felt deeply — boasted the worst public health and life opportunities in Scotland. He took Science and medical degrees at Glasgow University, graduating in Surgery top in his year, took his FRCS in 1975 and his MD two years later.

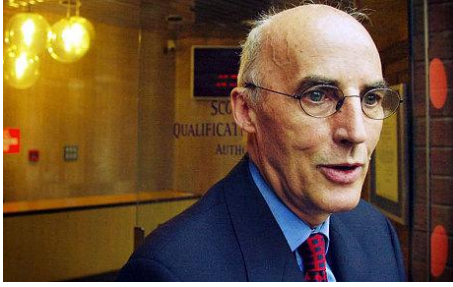
In 1978 he was appointed consultant neurosurgeon at Glasgow Institute of Neurological Services, at the Southern General Hospital; at 32 he was three years younger than any previous consultant. He took on a heavy burden of teaching with enthusiasm, and in 1983 published *An Introduction to Neurosurgery*.

Frustrated by his inability even as a consultant to bring about improvement and change in the NHS, which he was convinced the Conservatives were starving of funds, he decided to stand for Parliament though it meant a pay cut of £10,000 a year. He secured the nomination for the suburban seat of Strathkelvin and Bearsden, and in 1987 ousted the popular Conservative vice-chairman Michael Hirst.

Within a year Kinnock made Galbraith Shadow Scottish Health Minister; he soon confirmed the scrapping of Labour's commitment to absorb private hospitals into the NHS. In 1992 John Smith made him a UK employment spokesman, but the next year he left the front bench for his family and his constituents.

When Labour came to power in 1997, Tony Blair appointed Galbraith Scottish health and sports minister. He launched a drive to pump extra funding into areas where he believed the NHS had been letting the public down, and a campaign to improve Scotland's diet and public health.

Galbraith was one of a small minority of Labour MPs to seek election to the Scottish Parliament, comfortably winning Strathkelvin in 1999. When Donald Dewar named the first Scottish Executive, he caused some surprise by moving him from Health to the Children and Education portfolio; there were mutterings that Galbraith had "gone native" at the NHS.



Sam Galbraith in his role as Scottish Education Minister in 2000

This appointment proved Galbraith's most controversial. Unbeknown to all but the officials responsible, the Scottish Qualifications Authority, answerable to Galbraith and Henry McLeish, was in crisis. In the summer of 2000 the marking of exam papers broke down, denying thousands of students the results needed for university entrance. Galbraith shouldered the blame, toughing out calls for his resignation.

That October Dewar died, McLeish succeeded him and Galbraith, to his relief, was moved to Environment. But he soon decided that, with a continuing question mark over his health, he needed a break from politics, and in March 2001 resigned as a minister. Even then controversy did not escape him; critics claimed he had nodded through a grant to the Scottish Opera at the very last minute.

Galbraith gave up his seat at Westminster that summer, and left Holyrood in 2003. He went back to lecturing on brain surgery, not trusting his hands.

Sam Galbraith married Nicola Tennant in 1987; she and their three daughters survive him.