



Who Funds You? You?



Report
2022

Introduction

At openDemocracy we believe that debates about important issues that affect us all should be as transparent as possible. That means we need to know who is being paid what, and by whom, to influence public policy.

In the UK – and many other countries – there are organisations that describe themselves as ‘think tanks’. They expressly set out to explore ideas and influence public policy. They usually produce research reports – some better than others – and promote them through the media and in policy circles.

Their current and former staff may take formal advisory roles with the government. Meanwhile politicians are often invited to take senior positions within think tanks, in addition to their day jobs.

But not all think tanks are the same.

Some are very clear about who funds them and the ideology that underpins their work. Many provide vital independent scrutiny of ideas and expert analysis of public policy.

But many are not as open as they could be.

"I'm so pleased that Who Funds You? is being relaunched on its tenth anniversary, and I can't think of a better organisation than openDemocracy to take it forward. openDemocracy has consistently shone a light on the world of dark money and politics, and Who Funds You? is a perfect complement to openDemocracy's excellent investigative work."

Clifford Singer,
Former Director, Who Funds You?

1 **Think tank behind Truss's budget shouldn't be a charity, says ex-watchdog official**
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/institute-of-economic-affairs-truss-charity-commission-tax-cuts/>

2 **Dark money think tank's own advisor accuses it of 'hiding' behind charity law to lobby**
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dark-money-investigations/dark-money-think-tanks-own-advisor-accuses-it-of-hiding-behind-charity-law-to-lobby/>

3 **Regulatory alert issued to charitable think tanks**
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/regulatory-alert-issued-to-charitable-think-tanks>

4 **Legatum Institute Foundation: Case report**
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/charity-case-report-legatum-institute-foundation/legatum-institute-foundation-case-report>

A number of opaque think tanks do not disclose their funders at all but nevertheless benefit from charitable status and the tax breaks this brings. Questions have been repeatedly raised^{1 2} about whether some such think tanks operate within the rules of charity law.³ In some cases they have been found to be in breach of the rules.⁴

In some cases, think tanks do not even have a clear corporate structure, which makes it even harder to understand their finances. Without knowing who funds think tanks, we cannot be certain whose interests they are really advancing, and why they are advocating for a particular policy stance.

For that reason, we have taken over the running of a project called 'Who Funds You?'

Run by volunteers for seven years until 2019, it analysed the transparency disclosures of the UK's most prominent think tanks and gave them a rating based on how open about their funding they were.

Now, on the 10th anniversary of the first report, the project founders have given us permission to restart the project. No money changed hands and they provided their branding assets for free. We are proud to pick up their baton because we believe there is a valuable public service in letting people know which voices are opaque and which think tanks can be trusted to tell us who funds them.

Every year, we will rate high-profile think tanks on the basis of how transparent they are about their funding. We will give them a grade based on how open they are about their donors and produce a report and website to share the results.

Who Funds You?

The UK campaign for think tank transparency

Key findings in 2022

Our analysis found that nine out of 28 institutions received an 'E' rating – the bottom end of our funding transparency scale. This was up by three from the previous audit, which was conducted by Who Funds You? volunteers in 2019.

Most of the 'E'-rated institutions in 2019, including the Adam Smith Institute, the Centre for Policy Studies, Civitas, the Institute of Economic Affairs, Policy Exchange, and the TaxPayers' Alliance, all received the same rating of 'E' this year, showing that no improvements have been made in funding transparency in the past three years.

The least transparent UK think tanks had an income of at least £14.3m according to their most recent corporate filings – yet it is not possible to know where the bulk of this money comes from. This is likely to be an underestimate of the true figure, as some of the most opaque think tanks, such as the Adam Smith Institute, do not operate under one clear corporate body.

An [openDemocracy investigation](#) looking at how US climate deniers pump millions into think tanks with strong links to the Tory party found that the TaxPayers' Alliance, the Institute of Economic Affairs, Policy Exchange, the Adam Smith Institute and the Legatum Institute have all steadily increased their influence in the heart of government in the last decade.

These five organisations have secured hundreds of meetings with ministers since 2012, and some of their staff or directors are lawmakers themselves. Yet all received 'E' ratings for transparency this year.

We found that four think tanks had become more opaque. ResPublica saw the biggest drop in its transparency rating. It fell from a grade 'B' to an 'E', as it has not published any recent transparency information on its website.

On the other end of the spectrum, think tanks rated 'A' are highly transparent, naming all funders who gave £5,000 or more in the last year, and declaring the exact amount given by each funder.

We found that ten out of 28 think tanks had earned an 'A' rating, including the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the New Economics Foundation. Demos and the Institute of Public Policy Research both improved their transparency rating from a 'B' to an 'A'.

The most transparent think tanks – those that achieved a grade A or B – had an aggregate income of £30.2m, suggesting transparency may also be good for fundraising.

In detail

Organisation	Income	Displays funding details on website	2019 Rating	2022 Rating	Change – more or less transparent
Institute for Fiscal Studies	£9,802,176	Yes – view page	A	A	▶
New Economics Foundation	£3,327,043	Yes – view page	A	A	▶
Tax Justice Network	£2,922,575	Yes – view page	A	A	▶
Resolution Foundation	£2,074,556	Yes – view page	A	A	▶
Demos	£1,514,340	Yes – view page	B	A	▲
Institute for Public Policy Research	£1,069,013	Yes – view page	B	A	▲
Fabian Society	£727,253	Yes – view page	A	A	▶
Unlock Democracy	£372,951	Yes – view page		A	▲
Compass	£305,096	Yes – view page	A	A	▶
High Pay Centre	£225,000	Yes – view page	A	A	▶
Institute for Government	£5,456,952	Yes – view page	A	B	▼
Centre for Cities	£1,728,753	Yes – view page	B	B	▶
Social Market Foundation	£696,610	Yes – view page	B	B	▶
Reform	£217,934	Yes – view page	C	B	▲
Chatham House	£18,180,000	Yes – view page	C	C	▶
Bright Blue	£121,834	Yes – view page	C	C	▶
Smith Institute	Not disclosed	No	D	D	▶
Adam Smith Institute	Not disclosed	No	E	E	▶
Legatum Institute	£4,175,671	No	C	E	▼
Policy Exchange	£3,396,554	No	E	E	▶
Centre for Social Justice	£2,689,735	Yes – view page	D	E	▼
Institute of Economic Affairs	£2,343,000	No	E	E	▶
Centre for Policy Studies	£1,857,119	No	E	E	▶
TaxPayers' Alliance	£815,000	No	E	E	▶
Civitas	£705,657	Yes – view page	E	E	▶
ResPublica	£144,495	No	B	E	▼
Centre for Labour and Social Studies		No	A		
Policy Network		No	C		

Click on the organisation to go to their website

Two think tanks that were formerly included in the audit, Policy Network and CLASS, are apparently no longer active.

Why is this needed?

“For many years, certain think tanks have populated the media, played a decisive role in our politics and changed the life of this nation. Yet we lack the crucial information required to see who they really are: namely, who funds them.”

George Monbiot,
journalist and campaigner.

Let's take the example of Liz Truss, who became prime minister in September 2022. She had earlier helped to launch FREER, described as the parliamentary wing of an influential think tank, the Institute of Economic Affairs.⁵

Truss's political secretary was head of government affairs at another think tank, the Adam Smith Institute. Neither organisation reveals its donors – and both score an 'E', the lowest grade possible, in our ratings – yet they are very influential in the British government.

Many other politicians have links to opaque think tanks. Their current and former staff are often invited into policy-making bodies and given advisory roles where they have access to civil servants and politicians. Think tank representatives are often invited to comment on government policy in the media.

When we face the double whammy of a climate emergency and a cost of living crisis driven by energy bills, it's important to know if voices being heard in the corridors of power are being funded by, say, the oil and gas industry.

openDemocracy has previously uncovered evidence of exactly this type of relationship⁶. For example, we have shown how the think tank Policy Exchange received money from oil giant ExxonMobil before proposing a policy that would benefit the oil industry. This proposal was then turned into legislation by the Conservative government.

Revealing which organisations are not transparent about who's giving them money is a vital first step in encouraging greater openness in British political life.

These transparency ratings can also provide important context for those who might listen to them, be it broadcasters, journalists, politicians or other influential bodies.

When we know which think tanks are not transparent about their funding, we can put pressure on them to be less secretive.

5 **Truss-favoured thinktank attacks 'massive transfer of wealth' to landowners**
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/sep/27/truss-favoured-thinktank-attacks-massive-transfer-of-wealth-to-landowners>

6 **Revealed: Policing bill was dreamed up by secretive oil-funded think tank**
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dark-money-investigations/policing-bill-policy-exchange-exxonmobil-lobbying/>

“Think tanks can play an important role informing policy in Westminster, yet opacity about their funding can raise suspicion that they’re peddling positions in favour of vested interests”

“Given the proximity of some of these organisations to those in high office, the public really should know who is backing them, for what, and with how much money.”

Steve Goodrich,
head of research and investigations at Transparency International UK

* During 2022, the earliest reported year we will accept is 2020.

** Precise funding bands should be no broader than £10,000 for amounts up to £50,000, no broader than £20,000 for amounts between £50,000 and £200,000, and no broader than £50,000 for amounts above that.

Methodology

Using the original methodology developed by Who Funds You? openDemocracy looked at organisations’ own websites or annual accounts where a link was provided by the think tank website. Ratings are based on accessibility of information. To meet each relevant rating, organisations must meet all the criteria listed.

To be eligible for an ‘A’, ‘B’ or ‘C’ rating, organisations should also publish their annual income.

A

- Names all funders who gave £5,000 or more in the last reported year.*
- Declares exact amount given by each funder.

B

- Names at least 85% of funders (by value) who gave £5,000 or more in the last reported year.
- Groups funders into precise funding bands.**
- (Organisations that use broad funding bands may be eligible for a ‘B’ rating as long as they name all funders.)

C

- Names at least 50% of funders (by value) who gave £5,000 or more in the last reported year.
- Groups funders into precise or broad funding bands.
- (Organisations that omit funding bands may be eligible for a ‘C’ rating as long as they name all funders.)

D

- Names some funders (but only a minority, or not in a systematic way).

E

- No or negligible relevant information provided.

Conclusion

The results show there is huge variation in funding transparency offered by the UK's leading think tanks. Overall, the number of transparent think tanks has decreased.

Some, such as the Institute for Fiscal Studies, are completely open about who gives them money. This allows us to calibrate their contributions to debates.

Others, such as the Social Market Foundation, are mostly transparent. However, there are a slew of high-profile bodies with close links to the current UK government that remain opaque about their funding.

Notably, in the intervening time since the last Who Funds You? Audit, more think tanks have become less transparent than more transparent. This suggests that the Who Funds You? project did provide a mechanism for driving more transparency in the sector. We hope it will once again.

In a liberal democracy, everyone has a right to contribute to the public policy debate. To be clear, there is no legal requirement that think tanks disclose their funders. But opaque think tanks that seek to influence public policy must be treated with caution until they are prepared to be honest and open about their funding.

All think tanks must strive to achieve an 'A' grade in our ranking, and those that benefit from charitable status should ensure they comply with the public benefit rules this entails. Similarly, think tanks that seek to directly influence public policy should ensure that they do not break statutory lobbying rules.⁷

There are many important debates we face: from what to do about the climate emergency to how to handle the crises in the cost of living and cost of energy. The voices of interested parties are welcome – indeed, sometimes vital – in these debates but they must be overt, not hidden.

⁷ **Guidance, Office of the Registrar of Consultant Lobbyists.**
<https://registrarofconsultantlobbyists.org.uk/guidance/>

Recommendations

- Media organisations should be wary of platforming think tanks with low transparency ratings without making it clear to their audience that they do not disclose their funders.
- Where think tanks have declared funders – or been found to have been funded by donors that have a material financial interest in the policy debate at hand – this should always be disclosed to media audiences.
- The Charity Commission should rigorously enforce regulations around charitable status where legitimate concerns are raised about the political activities of think tanks.
- All think tanks in the UK should strive to achieve a grade ‘A’ in the Who Funds You? ranking.
- Think tanks that support the aims of the Who Funds You? Project should promote the project by prominently displaying their transparency rating on their website and linking to the project website.

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But who funds openDemocracy?

openDemocracy is not a think tank and it is for others to assess our own transparency efforts. Nevertheless, we are proud to disclose all of our funders over £5,000 per year, along with the purpose of each of these donations. In addition, we are grateful for the support of thousands of individual donors who choose to invest in our work. You can find out more at [opendemocracy.net/en/supporters](https://support.opendemocracy.net/en/supporters)

If you want to support the Who Funds You? project, you can donate to openDemocracy here: <https://support.opendemocracy.net/project/home>

openDemocracy has not received any funding specifically to support or relaunch the Who Funds You? project.



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