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Prescription for Disaster

In the UK, the US and Australia, governments built on dirty money cannot be trusted to protect us from the coronavirus.

The worst possible people are in charge at the worst possible time. In the UK, the US and Australia, the politics of the governing parties have been built on the dismissal and denial of risk. Just as these politics have delayed the necessary responses to climate breakdown, ecological collapse, air and water pollution, obesity and consumer debt, so they appear to have delayed the effective containment of Covid-19.

I believe it is no coincidence that these three governments have responded later than comparable nations, and with measures that seemed woefully unmatched to the scale of the crisis. The UK's remarkable slowness to mobilise, followed by its potentially catastrophic strategy – fiercely criticised¹ by independent experts² and now abandoned – to create herd immunity, its continued failure to test and track effectively, or to provide protective equipment³ for health workers could help to cause large numbers of unnecessary deaths. But to have responded promptly and sufficiently would have meant jettisoning an entire structure of political thought, developed in these countries over the past half century.

Politics is best understood as public relations for particular interests. The interests come first; politics are the means by which they are justified and promoted. On the left, the dominant interest groups can be very large – everyone who uses public services, for example. On the right they tend to be much smaller. In the US, UK and Australia, they are very small indeed: mostly multi-millionaires and a very particular group of companies: those whose profits depend on the cavalier treatment of people and planet.

Over the past 20 years, I've researched the remarkably powerful but mostly hidden role of tobacco and oil companies in shaping public policy in these three nations. I've seen how the tobacco companies covertly funded an infrastructure of persuasion, to deny the impacts of smoking. This infrastructure was then used⁴, often by the same professional lobbyists, to pour doubt on climate science and attack researchers and environmental campaigners.

I showed how these companies funded right-wing think-tanks and university professors to launch attacks⁵ on public health policy in general, and create a new narrative of risk, tested on focus groups and honed in the media. They reframed responsible government as the "nanny state", the "health po-

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/15/epidemiologist-britain-herd-immunity-coronavirus-covid-19>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/15/uk-covid-19-strategy-questions-unanswered-coronavirus-outbreak>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/16/im-losing-faith-in-the-leadership-a-doctors-story-coronavirus>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2006/sep/19/ethicalliving.g2>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2006/feb/07/businessofresearch.smoking>

lice” and “elf ‘n’ safety zealots”. They dismissed scientific findings and predictions as “unfounded fears”, “risk aversion” and “scaremongering”. Public protections were recast⁶ as “red tape”, “interference” and “state control”. Government itself was presented as a mortal threat to our freedom. Their purpose was to render governments less willing and able to respond to public health and environmental crises.

The groups these corporations helped to fund – think-tanks and policy units, lobbyists and political action committees – were then used by other interests: private health companies hoping to break up the NHS, pesticide manufacturers seeking to strike down regulatory controls, junk food manufacturers resisting advertising restrictions, billionaires seeking to avoid tax. Between them, these groups honed the justifying ideology⁷ for fragmenting and privatizing public services, shrinking the state and crippling its ability to govern.

Now, in these three nations, this infrastructure is the government. Number 10 Downing Street has been filled with people from groups strongly associated with attacks on regulation and state intervention, such as Munira Mirza⁸, who co-founded the *Manifesto Club*; Chloe Westley⁹ from the *TaxPayers’ Alliance*; and of course, Dominic Cummings, who was hired by Matthew Elliott, the founder of the *TaxPayers’ Alliance*, to run *Vote Leave*.

When Boris Johnson formed his first government, the *Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA)*, that has been funded by the tobacco industry¹⁰ since 1963¹¹, boasted that 14 of its front benchers¹², including the Home Secretary, the Foreign Secretary and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, were “alumni of IEA initiatives”. The Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, has published one book and launched another through the IEA, which he has thanked¹³ for helping him “in waging the war of ideas.”

The Health Secretary, Matthew Hancock, in a previous role, sought to turn an IEA document¹⁴ into government policy. He has accepted significant donations¹⁵ from the organisation’s chairman, Neil Record. The Home Secretary, Priti Patel, was formerly a tobacco lobbyist¹⁶. One in five new Conservative MPs have worked in lobbying or public relations¹⁷ for corporate interests.

⁶ <https://www.monbiot.com/2013/07/15/smoking-gun/>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/01/rightwing-insurrection-usurps-democracy>

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/aug/05/boris-johnson-ushers-in-radical-new-era-of-special-advisers>

⁹ <https://cabinetofhorrors.org/chloe-westley/>

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/jun/01/thinktanks-big-tobacco-funds-smoking>

¹¹ https://www.tobaccotactics.org/index.php/IEA: History_of_Close_Ties_with_the_Tobacco_Industry

¹² <https://politicalemails.org/messages/8455>

¹³ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/dominic-raab-is-he-iea-s-man-in-government/>

¹⁴ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/right-wing-think-tank-secured-change-in-government-charity-lobbying-policy-after-15000-gift-from-ab870911.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/new-health-secretary-matt-hancock-12891819>

¹⁶ https://powerbase.info/index.php/Priti_Patel

¹⁷ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dark-money-investigations/revealed-fifth-new-tory-mps-have-worked-lobbyists/>

Modern politics is impossible to understand without grasping *the Pollution Paradox*¹⁸. The greater the risk to public health and wellbeing a company presents, the more money it must spend on politics, to ensure it isn't regulated out of existence. Political spending comes to be dominated by the dirtiest companies, ensuring that they wield the greatest influence, crowding out their cleaner rivals.

While no one has a commercial interest in the spread of coronavirus, the nature and tenor of the governments these interests have built impedes state attempts to respond quickly and appropriately.

Brexit (remember that?) could be interpreted as an effort to bridge the great split within the Conservative Party, caused by the rising power of dirty money. The party became divided between an older, conservative base, with a strong aversion to novelty and change, and its polar opposite: the risk-taking radical right. Leaving the European Union permits a reconciliation of these very different interests, simultaneously threatening food standards, environmental protections, price controls on medicines and other crucial regulations, while raising barriers to immigration and integration with other nations. It invokes ancient myths of empire, destiny and exceptionalism while, potentially, exposing us to the harshest of international trade conditions. It is likely further to weaken the state's capacity to respond to the many crises we face.

The theory on which this form of government is founded can seem plausible and logically consistent. Then reality hits, and we find ourselves in the worst place from which to respond: governed by people with an ingrained disregard for public safety and a reflexive resort to denial. When disasters arrive, its exponents find themselves wandering nonplussed through the wastelands, unable to reconcile what they see with what they believe. Witness Scott Morrison's response to the Australian fires¹⁹ and Boris Johnson's belated engagement²⁰ with the British floods. It is what we see today, as the Trump, Johnson and Morrison governments flounder in the face of this pandemic. They are called upon to govern, but they know only that government is the enemy.

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¹⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/aug/07/fossil-fuel-lobby-pollute-politics-climate-crisis>

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jan/02/scott-morrison-abused-by-bushfire-victims-in-nsw-town-of-cobargo>

²⁰ <https://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/opinion/columnists/boris-johnsons-five-flooding-failures-make-jeremy-corbyn-look-credible-pm-finally-visits-doncaster-tom-richmond-1747497>