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Thinktanking the Country

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The BBC's promotion of dark-money lobby groups no longer looks like an accident. It looks like a policy.

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 5th October 2022

Some of it is easy to understand. Liz Truss, a hollow vessel filled with secondhand ideas by the dark-money thinktanks, believed their assurances that the magic of an unregulated market and tax cuts for the very rich would trigger an economic boom. The thinktanks must scarcely have believed their luck: that someone so malleable could become prime minister.

On the day of the mini-budget, they [crowded about](#) taking over the government. The Conservative Home founder, Tim Montgomerie, remarked that this was “[a massive moment](#)” for the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), which had “incubated Truss and Kwarteng during their early years as MPs. Britain is now their laboratory.” The head of the institute, Mark Littlewood, then [retweeted his comment](#) with a sunglasses emoji.

Above a screenshot of a Guardian headline asking “Has Liz Truss handed power over to the extreme neoliberal thinktanks?”, the IEA's head of public policy, Matthew Lesh, [wrote “Yes”](#). The economic disaster inflicted by Truss and Kwarteng has been dubbed the Tufton Street Massacre, as the groups that devised their policies are headquartered in and around Tufton Street in Westminster.

[I see these thinktanks](#), which refuse to reveal the sources of their funding, as lobbyists for hidden interests. We know from leaks and US reports that these include, in some cases, [tobacco firms](#), oil firms and foreign oligarchs. But there is one question to which no one has provided a complete and satisfactory answer.

Day after day, year after year, the BBC has provided these extremists with a massive platform on its news and current affairs programmes. Major BBC programmes including

Today, Question Time, Newsnight and Any Questions? are populated by speakers from the Institute of Economic Affairs, the Adam Smith Institute, the Taxpayers' Alliance, the Centre for Policy Studies and Policy Exchange. These groups also happen to have been rated by the campaign Who Funds You? as [among the most opaque](#) of all those it investigated.

When the IEA complained to Ofcom about the broadcaster James O'Brien's description of the institute as a "hard-right lobby group for vested interests of big business, fossil fuels, tobacco, junk food" on his LBC show, Ofcom [rejected its complaint](#), ruling that he had not distorted the facts. Yet the combined platform of these dark-money groups on the BBC is surely many times bigger than that of any other non-party grouping.

The BBC routinely torches its [editorial guidelines](#), which state that "we should make checks to establish the credentials of our contributors and to avoid being hoaxed". When the IEA was set up, one of its founders instructed that it should operate as a front group: "we should give no indication in our literature that we are working to educate the public along certain lines". Its manifesto, he said, had been [written in "cagey terms"](#). It was a hoax from the outset.

At first, I thought the problem was naivety. But then I saw the [BBC's responses to complaints](#) about its failure to establish the credentials of its contributors. They were defensive, irrational and contradictory. At one point, the BBC said it wasn't necessary to tell the audience that an MP arguing against climate action was the director of an oil company, on the grounds that he had declared this interest elsewhere. Soon afterwards it claimed that when giving the head of the IEA a platform to argue against new tobacco regulation, it wasn't necessary to state that his organisation has been funded by tobacco companies, on the grounds that the IEA had *not* declared this interest. If my experience is anything to go by, the only effect of raising these issues is to get deplatformed by the programmes you criticise.

In 2019, the Observer journalist Carole Cadwalladr spoke to the then BBC director-general, Tony Hall, about this blatant disregard of the rules. In response, he [changed the editorial guidelines](#) to state that thinktanks' affiliations and funding "should be made available to the audience, when relevant to the context". The policy was implemented for about a fortnight, and has been disregarded ever since.

Now the situation has gone beyond satire. These groups are being called upon by the BBC to comment on the performance of this government as if they are impartial observers,

rather than the authors of its policies.

I no longer believe the BBC's failure to uphold its own rules is an accident. I believe it's a policy. But why? Appeasement is always part of the answer: the BBC constantly seeks to placate the billionaire press and Conservative governments. More importantly, it has always been a defender and projector of established power.

The BBC's chair is Richard Sharp. Much has been made of Sharp's [donations to the Conservative party](#). But his relationship with the dark-money thinktanks concerns me even more. He was a director of the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS), a dark-money group founded by Margaret Thatcher and Keith Joseph. On the day of Kwarteng's mini-budget, the CPS [claimed responsibility](#) for several of his [key announcements](#). Sharp's family foundation has [also donated](#) to the Institute for Policy Research, which is more transparent about its funding but in turn sends funds to the Centre for Policy Studies and the Taxpayers' Alliance, another opaque lobby group that has [trumpeted its influence](#). The Taxpayers' Alliance has long campaigned to [scrap the BBC's licence fee](#). The BBC grants it, unlike other critics, a massive amount of airtime.

I'm sure there's more to this story than we yet know. It's hard to believe how freely the BBC breaks its own rules to promote and normalise an extreme neoliberal cult. Neoliberalism is the intellectual justification for the class war waged by the rich against the poor. The BBC is part of the team.

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