

Who Funds You?

2024 Audit report

Introduction

Welcome to the 2024 Who Funds You? Report.

Who Funds You? audits the financial disclosures of UK think tanks, monitors the amount of money flowing through these organisations and promotes greater transparency in the sector.

This is the fourth Who Funds You? report that openDemocracy has produced since 2022.

Since the last report there has been a General Election and a change of government in the UK, meaning that there may be a chance to see improvements in the way that think tanks are regulated.

It will also see a shift in the ability of some individual think tanks to influence power.

But regardless of who is in and who is out, this report provides an important starting point for debate about how think tank funding and public policy development operates in the UK.

The think tanks covered by this report are of different sizes, scope and tactics. However, they all seek to influence public policy and many do so very effectively. That's why this project matters.

If there are prominent voices in British political life we have a right to know who is actually speaking, and who is paying to advance the arguments.

That is why this project exists: to encourage think tanks to voluntarily improve the transparency of their operations by stating clearly who funds them.

It does this by applying a clear, straightforward methodology which analyses information published by think tanks themselves. We know this works.

Each year we encounter several think tanks who only update or improve their approach to financial transparency because we contact them.

Our ratings offer potential funders, journalists, politicians and members of the public an independent assessment that helps to identify which think tanks follow best practice in terms of transparency.

Transparency by itself does not guarantee quality analysis or intellectual independence. But we believe financial transparency to be a necessary guard rail mitigating against spin, bias and vested interests.

By applying a consistent methodology for rating financial transparency, Who Funds You? provides think tanks themselves with a framework and an incentive for them to declare their funders.

We would be delighted if every think tank in this report, regardless of ideological outlook, could achieve an A-rating.

The core methodology of Who Funds You? has been consistent since the project was originally established by a team of volunteers in 2012.

Because we have remained true to that analytical approach we can track trends in the transparency of the sector.

We are indebted to the project's original founders for letting us restart this work after Who Funds You? fell into abeyance in 2019.

This year research for this report was undertaken in Quarter 3 of 2024, by Alastair Tibbitt and Stewart Kirkpatrick at Great Shout Cooperative on behalf of openDemocracy.

We are also deeply grateful to the Network for Social Change who provided funding for this report.

Who Funds You?

£98 Million

The amount UK think tanks spent influencing UK politics in 2024.
(And that's just what we know about)

Key Findings

In the run up to the general election UK think tanks had an income of £97.7m pounds, up from £85.6m in the previous year. A 14% year-on-year increase.

For 2024 we audited 64 think tanks (one of which - the Centre for Labour and Social Studies - appears to be no longer active).

However, 21 of these organisations did not disclose their income at all, suggesting there's a large amount of think tank funding no-one can know anything about, let alone who it comes from or why it was awarded.

Overall, the UK Think Tank sector has become less transparent about its sources of funding.

The number of D or E-rated think tanks - those with poor financial transparency - have increased by 1. But the amount of money they collectively raised rose by £10m.

Conversely there are also fewer transparent think tanks.

In 2023 we found that there were 30 think tanks that were awarded A or B-grades. This year there were just 26.

The total money raised by these transparent think tanks plummeted from £45.5m to £25m.

Between 2023 and 2024 five think tanks improved their ratings, but four think tanks transparency practices deteriorated.

For example, Chatham House, which had an income of more than £21m last year, was down-rated from a B-grade to a C-grade. Labour Together organisation was given a D-grade for 2024.

Taken together these changes represent a worrying move away from transparency that should concern everyone.

Which Think Tanks changed rating?

Improving		Deteriorating	
Centre for London	B > A	Business for Scotland	A > E
Demos	B > A	Labour Together	A > D
These Islands	C > A	Institute for Government	B > D
New Local	D > C	Chatham House	B > C
Jimmy Reid Foundation	D > C		

Without the Who Funds You project? This transparency picture would be even worse.

Four think tanks took immediate steps to improve and update their transparency disclosures when we first contacted them about their proposed rating this year.

Who Funds You?

Organisation	2019 Rating	2022 Rating	2023 Rating	2024 Rating	2024 Income
Resolution Foundation	A	A	A	A	£3,659,959
New Economics Foundation	A	A	A	A	£3,457,432
Tax Justice Network	A	A	A	A	£1,724,171
Institute for Fiscal Studies	A	A	A	A	£1,042,207
Fabian Society	A	A	A	A	£975,000
Compass	A	A	A	A	£456,805
High Pay Centre	A	A	A	A	£129,435
Institute for Public Policy Research	B	A	A	A	£342,972
Unlock Democracy		A	A	A	£387,618
Runnymede Trust			A	A	£1,124,820
British Future			A	A	£838,688
Centre for Cross Border Studies			A	A	£630,868
Institute of Welsh Affairs			A	A	£482,653
The Bevan Foundation			A	A	£424,604
The Common Weal			A	A	£157,097
Scotland Futures Forum			A	A	£144,302
Migration Policy Scotland			A	A	£140,103
Centre for Health and the Public Interest			A	A	£139,239
Centre			A	A	£1,950
Demos	B	A	B	A	£1,131,026
Centre for London			B	A	£1,198,932
These Islands			C	A	£27,465
Centre for Cities	B	B	B	B	£1,878,183
Social Market Foundation	B	B	B	B	£1,054,861
Green Alliance			B	B	£2,970,000
Reform			B	B	£568,275
Chatham House	C	C	B	C	£21,155,000
Bright Blue	C	C	C	C	Not disclosed
Royal United Services Institute			C	C	£16,800,162
Pivotal			C	C	£137,307
Onward			C	C	Not disclosed
The Foreign Policy Centre			C	C	Not disclosed
New Local			D	C	Not disclosed
Jimmy Reid Foundation			D	C	£29,208
Labour Together			A	D	Not disclosed
Institute for Government	A	B	B	D	£5,740,123
Centre for Social Justice	D	E	D	D	£3,561,396
Institute of Economic Affairs	E	E	D	D	£2,318,000
E3G			D	D	£9,642,854
Centre for Policy Studies			D	D	£1,972,697
Public Policy Projects			D	D	Not disclosed
The Entrepreneurs Network			D	D	Not disclosed
Business for Scotland*			A	E	Not disclosed
ResPublica	B	E	E	E	Not disclosed
Legatum Institute*	C	E	E	E	£4,901,679
Policy Exchange	E	E	E	E	£4,021,337
Civitas	E	E	E	E	£630,774
Adam Smith Institute*	E	E	E	E	£408,026
TaxPayers' Alliance	E	E	E	E	Not disclosed
The Centre for Enterprise, Markets and Ethics			E	E	£799,614
Global Warming Policy Foundation			E	E	£279,930
Reform Scotland			E	E	£194,726
Conservative Way Forward			E	E	Not disclosed
Migration Watch			E	E	Not disclosed
New Social Covenant Unit			E	E	Not disclosed
Orthodox Conservatives			E	E	Not disclosed
Our Scottish Future			E	E	Not disclosed
Scottish Business UK			E	E	Not disclosed
Scottish Independence Convention			E	E	Not disclosed
Social and Environmental Justice			E	E	Not disclosed
The Bow Group			E	E	Not disclosed
The Bruges Group			E	E	Not disclosed
Centre for the Union			E	E	Not disclosed

*These Organisations have a particularly opaque structure. They may operate through a body that is not listed on any UK corporate registry, there may be no single registered UK corporate body that corresponds to the public facing part of the organisation, they may be directly linked to one or more foreign organisations or the public disclosure information may differ considerably from that on public registries. If contacted the organisation may not have provided further information to clarify their governance or finances.** The total 2024 income figure for the Legatum Institute is comprised of two figures. The income reported by the charitable organisation Legatum Institute Foundation (which has subsequently been closed) and the income declared for the only currently active UK incorporated body linked to the Legatum Institute, Prosperity Institute Ltd.

Why do we do this?

Think tanks play an important and influential role in the workings of British political life.

At their best, they help to define the issues that must be tackled and develop new ideas that can improve all our lives.

Think tanks are many and varied. Some are explicitly affiliated with a particular political party, even if they are rarely democratically run themselves. Others are avowedly non-partisan. Some are charities, many are not.

Some have complex governance structures that extend beyond the UK and seem designed to obscure basic facts about who controls them and their financial affairs.

Some work with local government, some work across the globe and some focus on the national parliament in Westminster. Some target the devolved legislatures in Edinburgh, Cardiff or London. Still others target specific policy areas such as the environment, health or the economy.

Some think tanks care deeply about the credibility and integrity of their research work and regard financial transparency as a key factor that supports this.

Just as professional academics are routinely expected to disclose possible conflicts of interest, and the details of who funds their work when they publish research, think tanks that want their work to be able to have impact should be able to evidence that they operate independently and transparently too.

"It is of crucial importance that transparency, fairness, and accuracy triumph over profit motives, political spin, and vested interests"

It is perhaps simplistic to say that "he who pays the piper calls the tune," but there are countless studies that show that "stakeholder funding" can and does affect research outcomes.

To highlight just one example¹. An independent academic study in 2022 that assessed the activities of think tanks across the world that were active in nuclear weapons policy. It found that "all think tanks in the sample accepted funding from nuclear vested interests and, second, that such 'stakeholder funding' has real effects on intellectual freedom.

"It is of crucial importance that transparency, fairness, and accuracy triumph over profit motives, political spin, and vested interests," the authors argue.

Despite this there are many UK think tanks that consistently do not disclose where their funding comes from. Some have even tested the boundaries of the law around lobbying and charitable status^{2 3}.

Some, such as the consistently E-rated Civitas have produced research so poor that it was removed from the organisation's website within hours of being published⁴.

Unfortunately, this did not stop the "embarrassingly wrong" report getting extensive media coverage at the time⁵. More than 12 months on, we note that Civitas have not issued a corrected report, despite pledging to do so.

There are many other documented examples of opaque think tanks deliberately promoting "fake news" and "fake views."⁶

Many think tanks play a vital role in the revolving doors between elected office, the media and public policy development, and they

often cultivate close ties with current and former politicians.

Some may have serving politicians on their boards, and some pay politicians to produce policy papers or speak at events.

Think tanks can also act as an incubator for aspiring political leaders, helping them to gain contacts, financing, public profile, supporters and credibility. Some are also funded by the same people that donate directly to politicians or to political parties.

For example, Neil Record, who is Life Vice-President and donor to the D-rated Institute of Economic Affairs and also Chairman of climate-denial campaign Net Zero Watch, reportedly lent his London home to Kemi Badenoch as part of £10,000 worth of support she declared for her - ultimately successful - Conservative Party Leadership campaign⁷.

In return, politicians may reward think tank staff with positions on advisory groups, and invitations to influential parliamentary hearings.

Political parties of every stripe have selected former think tank staff as candidates. It is this insider influence that is attractive to donors.

All think tanks try to influence public policy. Their annual reports often boast of their access to the machinery of

government and that their policy recommendations have been adopted by policy makers.

Some think tanks are part of national or global networks that share common funders and ideological aims, such as the Atlas Network of libertarian think tanks⁸.

They coordinate their activities in order to promote the same policies across different countries and continents.

Alongside influencing policy makers directly think tanks also work hard to court the media and boast of the extent and range of the coverage their work generates.

Increasingly, think tanks are going direct to the public via social media. This helps them grow their ability to set the terms of the debate in the wider public sphere, without having to rely on traditional media at all.

All this activity must be paid for, and the transparency declarations of some A-rated think tanks reveal a genuinely mixed economy with support coming from across the public, philanthropic and private sectors. This in itself gives them a degree of genuine independence.

Nevertheless a great deal of the money we have identified comes from private companies or very wealthy individuals with links to particular firms or industries. These donors may be entirely public spirited. Or they may have

self-interested reasons for wanting the government of the day - or a political party that may lead the government in the future - to adopt policies that make it easier for them to operate⁹.

The Legatum Institute and GB News are in some sense the logical conclusion of this process. The Dubai-based Legatum Group is a major investor in GB News and also it controls the E-rated Legatum Institute¹⁰, via an entity registered in the British Virgin Islands¹¹.

The result? GB News programs that can feature a cast of politician presenters and interviewees where everyone has been partially funded from the same opaque network of off-shore organisations¹².

This potential conflict is not always declared to unsuspecting viewers.

People may well ask whether these sophisticated influencing operations are really beneficial to UK democracy.

If we conclude that they risk providing a route for potentially hostile foreign states or other "dark money" vested interests to influence UK policy it is reasonable to ask how we can better regulate the think tanks that refuse to declare the funders that support them.

At the very least we should always ask these opaque organisations Who Funds You? At every opportunity.

Recommendations

For Think Tanks

- All think tanks in the UK should work to achieve a grade 'A' in the Who Funds You? ranking.
- Think tanks which support the aims of the Who Funds You? project are encouraged to promote their status by displaying their transparency rating on their website and linking to the Who Funds You? website at whofundyou.org
- Think tanks should make their corporate governance arrangements clear to the public, taking particular care to declare international funding and relationships.
- In addition, to publishing financial transparency data, Think Tanks should publish an accompanying Financial Transparency Policy that sets out their approach.

For Journalists and the media

- Media organisations should avoid quoting or otherwise platforming any think tanks with low transparency ratings (D or E) without making it clear to their audiences or readers that these institutions do not disclose their funders.
- Journalists should consider the risk to their reputation, and that of their employers, if they uncritically publish views and research findings produced by think tanks who are opaque about their funding.
- 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 – journalists should make this clear to media audiences.

MPs, politicians and government

- Politicians, government ministers and civil servants should only use research from think tanks which are not secretive about their funding.
- When think tanks which are not transparent about their funding present evidence in formal settings such as committees or inquiries, politicians should ask them to disclose who funds them in order to understand potential conflicts of interest.
- MPs and governments should investigate the foreign funding of influential think tanks which are opaque about their funding. They should consider improving regulations to mitigate against the scope for UK think tanks to act as a vehicle for foreign influence campaigns.
- Law makers should consider new regulations that would require Think Tanks that get more than a certain amount of money from a single source and advocate policy ideas to government ministers or officials that would benefit that source to be required to register as lobbyists.
- Law makers should consider reforming charity regulations to promote greater financial transparency throughout the sector and to ensure that the tax breaks enjoyed by Think Tanks with charitable status are justified and genuinely in the public interest.

Charity Regulators

- The Charity Commission, and similar organisations in other parts of the UK should ensure that regulations around charitable status are rigorously enforced where there are legitimate concerns about the political activities of think tanks.

Methodology

Who Funds You? ratings are based on the information provided on organisations' own websites (or via annual accounts where a link is provided).

Organisations must meet all criteria listed for each relevant rating. To be eligible for an A or B rating, organisations should also publish their annual income.

Before publication, each organisation is notified of their proposed transparency rating in advance and invited to provide any further information that may alter the grade.

A-rating:

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

B-rating:

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-rating:

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-rating

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

E-rating:

No or negligible relevant information provided.

*During 2024, the earliest reported year we will accept is 2022.

**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.

Who funds openDemocracy?

openDemocracy is a news organisation and not a think tank. However, as the authors of Who Funds You?, we think it's appropriate to disclose all the funders who give us more than £5,000 per year, along with the purpose of each of these donations.

The work for this report was supported by a specific donation of £10,000 from the Network for Social Change. You can find a list of our other supporters here: opendemocracy.net/en/supporters.

Endnotes

¹No such thing as a free donation? Research funding and conflicts of interest in nuclear weapons policy analysis. 2022, Kjølvi Egelund & Benoît Pelopidas, International Relations. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00471178221140000#fn19-00471178221140000>

²Regulator concludes case into climate change think tank following changes. Charity Commission Press Release. July 30, 2024. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/regulator-concludes-case-into-climate-change-think-tank-following-changes>

³Legatum breached charity regulations with Brexit work, Charity Commission finds. openDemocracy, 2018. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/legatum-breached-charity-regulations-with-brexit-work-charity-commission-finds/>

⁴Net Zero: an analysis of the economic impact. Civitas, September 2023 <https://www.civitas.org.uk/publications/net-zero/>

⁵'Embarrassingly Wrong' Tufton Street Net Zero Report Gets Widespread Coverage, Desmog, September 2023. <https://www.desmog.com/2023/09/28/embarrassingly-wrong-tufton-street-report-gets-widespread-coverage/>

⁶Fake News: Distortion of Democracy by Opaque, Deceptive and Fake 'Think Tanks', Transparify. 2017 <https://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/culture-media-and-sport-committee/fake-news/written/47967.pdf>

⁷Badenoch Runs UK Tory Leadership Campaign From Currency Guru's Home <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-10-02/uk-tory-hopeful-badenoch-runs-campaign-from-currency-guru-s-home>

⁸The Atlas Network. Partners. <https://www.atlasnetwork.org/partners>

⁹The Hard Consequences of Google's Soft Power. Wired. 2017. <https://www.wired.com/story/google-new-america-open-markets/>

¹⁰Conservative Faction Receives £50,000 from GB News Owner <https://www.desmog.com/2024/01/18/new-conservatives-faction-donation-50000-gb-news-owner-legatum-group/>

¹¹Prosperity Institute, latest filings. Companies House. <https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/14543238/filing-history>

¹²Democratic failings at the National Trust. GB News segment on the Legatum Institute Youtube Channel. <https://youtu.be/UKsmGN8CFzk>

