

Who's paying the pundits?

Covert lobbying, in the UK as well as the US, has severely set back efforts to combat the world's biggest problem

On the letters page of the Guardian last week, a Dr Alan Kendall attacked the Royal Society for “smearing” its opponents. The society had sent an official letter to Exxon, complaining about the oil company’s “inaccurate and misleading” portrayal of the science of climate change and about its funding of lobby groups that deny global warming is taking place. The letter, Kendall argued, was an attempt to “stifle legitimate discussion”.

Perhaps he is unaware of what has been happening. The campaign of dissuasion funded by Exxon and the tobacco company Philip Morris has been devastatingly effective. By insisting that man-made global warming is either a “myth” or not worth tackling, it has given the media and politicians the excuses for inaction they wanted. Partly as a result, in the US at least, these companies have helped to delay attempts to tackle the world’s most important problem by a decade or more.

Should we not confront this? If, as Kendall seems to suggest, we should refrain from exposing and criticising these groups, would that not be to “stifle legitimate discussion”?

There is still much more to discover. It is unclear how much covert corporate lobbying has been taking place in the UK. But the little I have been able to find so far suggests that here, as in the US, there seems to be some overlap between Exxon and the groups it has funded and the operations of the tobacco industry.

The story begins with a body called the International Policy Network (IPN). Like many other organisations that have received money from Exxon, it describes itself as a thinktank or an independent educational charity, but a more accurate description, it

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seems to me, would be “lobby group”. While the BBC would seldom allow someone from Bell Pottinger or Burson-Marsteller on air to discuss an issue of concern to their sponsors without revealing the sponsors’ identity, the BBC has frequently allowed IPN’s executive director, Julian Morris, to present IPN’s case without declaring its backers. IPN has so far received \$295,000 from Exxon’s corporate headquarters in the US. Morris told me that he runs his US office “solely for funding purposes”.

IPN argues that attempts to prevent (or mitigate) man-made climate change are a waste of money. It would be better to let it happen and adapt to its effects. The Network published a book this year arguing that “humanity has until at least 2035 to determine whether or not mitigation will also be a necessary part of our strategy to address climate change ... attempting to control it through global regulation of emissions would be counterproductive”. Morris has described the government’s chief scientist, Sir David King – who has campaigned for action on global warming – as “an embarrassment to himself and an embarrassment to his country”.

Like many of the groups that have been funded by ExxonMobil, IPN has also received money from the cigarette industry. Morris admits it has been given £10,000 by a US tobacco company. There is also a question mark about his involvement in a funding application to another tobacco company, RJ Reynolds.

In the archives that the cigarette companies were forced to open as part of the settlement of a class action in the US, there is a document entitled Environmental Risk. It is an application to RJ Reynolds to pay for a book about “the myth of scientific risk assessment”. “The principal objective of this book is to highlight the uncertainties inherent in ‘scientific’ estimates of risk to humans and the environment.” Among the myths it would be contesting were the adverse health effects of passive smoking. The application requested £50,000 to publish the book; the editors would be “Roger Bate and Julian Morris”.

Morris insists that his name was added to the document without his consent. He says he had “nothing” to do with the book. It was published in 1997 under the title “What Risk?”. It has a foreword by David Davis MP. It claims that passive smoking is no more dangerous than “eating 50g of mushrooms a week” and attacks “politically correct” beliefs such as “passive smoking causes lung cancer” and “mankind’s emissions of carbon dioxide will result in runaway global warming.” Julian Morris is not named as its co-editor, but he is the first person thanked in the acknowledgements, for his “editorial suggestions”.

The book’s editor, Roger Bate, is currently a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute – which has received \$1.6m from ExxonMobil – and the Competitive Enterprise Institute, which has received \$2 million. Until 2003, he was Julian Morris’s

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predecessor as head of the IPN. When the book was written, he ran the European Science and Environment Forum (ESEF), which published “What Risk?”. The registered owner of ESEF’s website is Julian Morris. He claims he had nothing to do with ESEF either, and registered the name purely “as a favour to a friend”.

PRWatch alleges that ESEF was originally called Scientists for Sound Public Policy (SSPP), and was founded by a public relations agency working for the tobacco company Philip Morris. Documents in the tobacco archives show that SSPP was the subject of a fierce turf war between the PR firms Burson Marsteller and APCO, who were vying for Philip Morris’s account. Burson Marsteller’s proposal argued that “industrial resistance” to regulation is “perceived as protection of commercial self-interests”. A different “countervailing voice” was required, consisting of “international opinion formers supported financially by the industry”. Their role would be “educating opinion leaders, politicians and the media.” The group would also seek funding from other industries. Some of the people ESEF recruited as “academic members” were people working for US lobby groups later funded by Exxon, who have made false claims about climate change.

Like Julian Morris, Roger Bate has often appeared on radio and TV programmes. Interviewed by the Today programme about climate change, he argued that cutting carbon emissions has been “folly all along”. Instead, we should concentrate on adapting to climate change. In 2000, he presented a film on BBC2 called “Organic Food: The Modern Myth”, on which Julian Morris also appeared. Bate has not yet answered the Guardian’s requests for a response. There is no law against taking money from corporations, or advancing arguments in the media that accord with their interests. Nor should there be. The problem is what appears to be a failure to declare an interest. When someone speaks on an issue of public importance, we should be allowed to see who has been paying them. This should apply to all advocates, pressure groups and thinktanks, from Greenpeace to the Competitive Enterprise Institute.

The BBC’s producer guidelines are clear on this point. “We need to ensure that we do not get involved with campaigning programming which is politically contentious. Programmes should not embrace the agenda of a particular campaign or campaigning group ...”. Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, some of us warned that campaigning groups did not always describe themselves as such. We were ignored. The BBC now seems to have woken up to the problem. But we have lost ten years in which climate change could have been tackled.

*George Monbiot’s book
is published this week by Penguin*

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