



## EDITOR'S CHOICE

# Think tanks should come out of the shadows

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This week we reveal a worrying network of links between the Institute of Economic Affairs, a UK think tank, and leading Conservative politicians. The IEA is a vocal opponent of public health initiatives, dismissing as “nanny state” interventions such policies as alcohol controls and sugar taxes. It is also an organisation that has taken money from the very companies whose products are widely held to be responsible for ill health epidemics, such as smoking and obesity. Perhaps most alarmingly, finds Jonathan Gornall in a *BMJ* investigation this week (doi:10.1136/bmj.l2164), the IEA is still backed by British American Tobacco.

These findings raise important questions about the potential for bias and conflicts of interest in the IEA's work and the government policies it might influence. Years ago the organisation might have been viewed as a harmless right wing think tank pumping out free market ideology. But today, with several Tory leadership contenders linked to the organisation financially, ideologically, or both, it is closer to power than ever before.

Readers of *The BMJ* will be accustomed to reports of industry's shadowy influence in policy making, such as the patient groups that assess NHS drugs while at the same time receiving undeclared industry funding.<sup>1</sup> Or clinical guidelines drawn up by doctors with undisclosed commercial conflicts of interest.<sup>2</sup>

In line with our commitment to greater transparency, *The BMJ* now declares all revenues received from drug and device companies, believing these to be legitimate subjects of scrutiny.<sup>3,4</sup>

What's to be done? It would help us all, including our politicians, if we knew exactly who funds think tanks such as the IEA. Their charitable status means they don't have to declare their individual funding sources. The government should compel all think tanks to publish a list of their donors; and media organisations such as the BBC should oblige them to reveal their funding sources—as *The BMJ* intends to do—before they can participate in public debate. Without this necessary scrutiny and disclosure, the public is unable to assess the extent to which their claims of academic independence are sustainable.

- 1 Mandeville KL, Barker R, Packham A, Sowerby C, Yarrow K, Patrick H. Financial interests of patient organisations contributing to technology assessment at England's National Institute for Health and Care Excellence: policy review. *BMJ* 2019;364:k5300. 10.1136/bmj.k5300 30651227
- 2 Wise J. Authors of US dermatology guidelines did not declare conflicts of interest. *BMJ* 2017;359:j4823. 10.1136/bmj.j4823 29046275
- 3 Godlee F, Abbasi K, Bloom T. BMJ declares its revenues from industry. *BMJ* 2017;359:j4930. 10.1136/bmj.j4930 29070599
- 4 BMJ. Publishing model. <https://www.bmj.com/about-bmj/publishing-model>.

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