

Following the money, summary of findings

Overall, think tanks have a variety of roles and are difficult to define. This includes producing research, hosting or taking part in events, working with politicians, and offering expertise or guidance.

Think tanks that have charitable status and have political views, something which is allowed under Charity Commission rules, also receive tax breaks and access to schemes including gift aid. This includes some of those not releasing information on larger donations.

“Dark money” is also an issue with think tank donations where think tanks either do not disclose some or all of their large donations. Whilst US-based donor information gives some insight into the type of donations which organisations of this kind receive, we know it is only a small part of the big picture.

Think tanks have large levels of influence over policy both internationally and nationally. Nationally they have influence, including over climate change policy and welfare policies. There are also organisations acting on a global level such as the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, which works with governments around the world. Alongside this are smaller changes such as think tanks operating or funding media organisations.

We looked at over one hundred think tanks and similar organisations. In total, we found that 22% of think tanks did not display a total income, and only 32% of think tanks revealed all funders over £7,500. We also saw that right-wing organisations were less transparent than left-wing organisations.

Our polling partner Millbank commissioned Deltapoll to ask 1,036 adults from Great Britain between the 19th and the 20th of October 2023 about think tank transparency. The overall result was clear; the public does not view think tanks as transparent. It was a view shared by every subgroup in the poll regardless of region, age, political leaning, employment status, sex, voting intention, social class, how they voted in the referendum and whether they were in a red wall seat. Overall, 59% of respondents thought that think tanks were not transparent. Only 19% of respondents thought that they were transparent while 22% answered “Don’t know”.

We propose a new funding transparency body which would support organisations to increase transparency, specific ICO guidance on donation transparency, and reforms to lobbying.

Commissioned by

Garvin Brown