

Links between think tanks and the tobacco industry

An investigation by *The Guardian* has revealed that many think tanks worldwide have apparently accepted donations from the tobacco industry. The investigation centred on the Atlas Network, which links nearly 500 free market think tanks in more than 90 countries with the stated aim to “promote individual freedom and remove barriers to human flourishing”. *The Guardian* noted that at least 53 of these organisations have received funds from tobacco companies, at least 25 have opposed tobacco taxes, and more than two dozen signed a 2016 letter to WHO arguing against plain packaging. More than 106 think tanks in six continents were found to have accepted money from the tobacco industry, opposed tobacco control measures, or both.

Industry donors included British American Tobacco, Japan Tobacco, and Philip Morris International (PMI).

Influential think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute in the USA and the Adam Smith Institute and the Institute of Economic Affairs in the UK have accepted donations. Article 5.3 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control obliges governments to safeguard public health policies from interference from the tobacco industry. “We may need to expand our understanding of what constitutes the industry, so that we are including front groups and allies as well as the companies themselves”, said Julia Smith (Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, Canada).

In a related development, more than 250 organisations and individuals working in global public health signed an open letter cautioning WHO against forming any kind of partnership with the PMI-funded Foundation for a Smoke-Free World. The previous week,

André Calantzopoulos, chief executive officer at PMI, had issued a call for open dialogue between the industry, regulators, and the public health sector. Smith remains sceptical. “I just do not see how the industry can have a positive role to play in public health messages”, she told *The Lancet Oncology*.

Deborah Arnott (Action on Smoking and Health, London, UK) points out that think tanks funded by the tobacco industry do not typically disclose this fact. “They appear regularly in the broadcast media as supposedly independent organisations, pushing policy positions in line with the commercial interests of their funders”, she said. “Transparency is essential; think tanks should be obliged to reveal their sources of funding. Action on Smoking and Health does, why don’t they?”

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For the **Guardian** report see <https://www.theguardian.com/business/ng-interactive/2019/jan/23/free-market-think-tanks-tobacco-industry>

For the **open letter to WHO** see <https://ggtc.world/2019/01/28/an-open-letter-to-the-director-general-and-executive-board-of-the-world-health-organization/>