

## Junktanks

I argued in the book that there is no distinctive British school or brand of political technology. Sure, Britain is a hub state. It has imported many techniques from the USA. The Conservative Party is fond of employing Lynton Crosby from Australia and Topham Guerin from New Zealand. At times, British political consultants have been popular exports, most notably at the height of New Labour's electoral success in 1997 and 2001.

All countries adapt what they import; but local alchemy in the UK has only produced alloys rather than new metals. Nevertheless, politicised think tanks are the closest thing to a British political technology. Not one unique to the UK. They first became a key feature in the USA. But they fit well into the British political and media model, in particular an oligarchic media that used to take many of its narratives and talking points from the old 'lobby' system, spoon-fed by government and parties.

The book [Dark Money](#) by Jane Meyer tells the story of how one Richard Fink, the in-house strategist of the American oligarchs the Koch brothers, wrote them a blueprint in 1976 called 'The Structure of Social Change'. Fink 'approached the manufacture of political change like any other product';<sup>1</sup> and proposed a three-stage strategy of political engineering to reestablish the corporate power then under attack by growing government regulation and labour, consumer and environmental movements. The first step was the creation of an 'alternative opinion elite', a 'counter-intelligentsia', in media and in universities. Second was packaging their ideas, via a new breed of think-tank, 'selling predetermined ideology to politicians and the public rather than undertaking scholarly research',<sup>2</sup> like the Heritage Foundation (established in 1973). Third was creating populist astroturf movements and cheerleading platforms to exaggerate popular support for the new ideas, like Americans for Prosperity. The think tanks played the central role in the overall aim of repackaging corporate interests as the public good.

There were plenty of real think tanks before 1976. Back in the 1970s, UK think tanks like the Institute of Economic Affairs were much more ideological. Now they serve private interests. UK think tanks have pushed deregulation, Brexit, climate change scepticism, and fossil fuel interests. So a new terminology is needed for the political technology think tanks that now exist alongside their real equivalents. One suggestion is [junktanks](#). Or drop the 'think' as no longer relevant, and use the other meaning of 'tank', for an attack on public governance.

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2016), p. 173.

<sup>2</sup> Mayer, *Dark Money*, p. 96.

Three good books exist on how this model has come to the UK. Peter Geoghegan refers to Meyer's title in his [Democracy for Sale: Dark Money and Dirty Politics](#). It didn't use to be possible to buy politics in the UK: elections were cheap. The main parties spent around [£50 million](#) at the relatively expensive 2019 UK elections. The figure for the 2020 US elections was [\\$14.4 billion](#). (Though that means a little money can go a long way in the UK). Think tanks are an alternative way of buying influence; and are often funded by the same networks. The UK has much less of steps one (universities) and three (astroturfing) in Fink's model; so there is more focus on think tanks to do elements of all three, creating and selling both in-house experts and public opinion.

James O'Brien in [How They Broke Britain](#) talks about the triadic 'right-wing media/Tory party/think-tank ecosystem'.<sup>3</sup> The intimacy between the three explains how policies often emerge from an echo-chamber: 'a previous revolving door existed between think tanks and the media, the *new* revolving door leads from think tanks to government and, sometimes, back again'.<sup>4</sup> Meaning both ideas and personnel.

Patrick Barwise and Peter York in [The War Against the BBC](#) describe how attacks on the Corporation were mounted by think tanks, lobbyists, 'a plethora of online trolls, bloggers and conspiracy theorists', politicised 'monitor' organisations like News-watch, attack books, and 'websites and YouTube channels' like Biased BBC.<sup>5</sup>

UK think tanks are located near the Palace of Westminster. Infamously many are on Tufton Street, less than a mile's distance. Their American equivalents are on K Street in Washington. Both are defined by their physical proximity to power. Their biggest influence is on media and online, however. The political think tank's first function is quotation. They are citation machines that exist to feed the media. By 2009, for example, the TaxPayers' Alliance was being quoted a huge 517 times a year in The Daily Mail alone.<sup>6</sup>

A second function is the training and exchange of personnel. Liz Truss, herself a preeminent think tank product, talked in 2022 of "vested interests dressed up as think tanks".<sup>7</sup> So she should know. Despite the trauma of the 2022 budget, Truss's new group PopCon has many of the same funders.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> James O'Brien, *How They Broke Britain*, (London: W H Allen, 2023), p. 343.

<sup>4</sup> O'Brien, *How They Broke Britain*, p. 164.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Barwise and Peter York, *The War Against the BBC*, (London: Penguin Books, 2020), pp. 104 and 118.

<sup>6</sup> O'Brien, *How They Broke Britain*, p. 152.

<sup>7</sup> From Liz Truss's speech to the 2022 Conservative Party Conference; [www.conservatives.com/news/2022/prime-minister-liz-truss-s-speech-to-conservative-party-conference-2022](http://www.conservatives.com/news/2022/prime-minister-liz-truss-s-speech-to-conservative-party-conference-2022)

<sup>8</sup> Peter Geoghegan, 'Liz Truss's "PopCons": Dark Money in Plain Sight', *LinkedIn*, 9 February 2024; [www.linkedin.com/pulse/liz-truss-popcons-dark-money-plain-sight-peter-geoghegan-uzbx/](http://www.linkedin.com/pulse/liz-truss-popcons-dark-money-plain-sight-peter-geoghegan-uzbx/)

A third function is radicalisation, just as US think tanks, the Tea Party and astroturf groups shifted first the US Republican Party and now the UK Conservatives to the right.

Fourth, once a receptive audience has been created in media and government, entire policies can be supplied off-the-peg.<sup>9</sup>

But public discussion in the UK does not yet puts heavy, ironic quotation marks around 'think tanks'.

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Geoghegan, 'Behind closed doors: how Tories used dark money-funded report to undermine workers' rights', *Democracy for Sale Substack*, 28 February 2024; <https://democracyforsale.substack.com/p/anti-trade-union-law-dark-money-tufton-street>