



Warning over Truss' links to US lobbyists who tanked Obama climate law

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Lobbying by US think tanks endorsed by Liz Truss made it impossible for Barack Obama to pass climate laws, and the UK should be “concerned” about their links to the Tory leadership favourite, a former US government adviser has warned.

The foreign secretary held secretive meetings with think tanks pushing for the UK to adopt a hardline free market agenda while on a visit to the US as a treasury minister in 2018 to drum up interest for a UK-US trade deal.

Speaking to openDemocracy, a former Obama administration climate adviser warned it would spell disaster if Truss sought to replicate the tactics of groups such as the Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute (AEI), Cato Institute and American Legislative Exchange Council.

“One of the reasons that the politics around climate change in the US is different to the UK right now is because of this powerful force of right-wing think tanks funded by fossil fuel interests,” Jonathan Phillips, who advised the US House of Representatives’ climate committee, told openDemocracy.

“You should be concerned if the tactics used by those groups are applied in the UK, because they have polarised the issue of climate change to the point that there is zero space for political debate, negotiation and compromise from the Republican Party.”

Asked if it was concerning that Britain’s next prime minister could be someone so close to these groups, he said: “Join the dots.”

The Heritage Foundation was among the groups Truss met in 2018. It had been directly involved in shaping Donald Trump’s policies to scrap environmental regulations and withdraw from the landmark Paris climate agreement.

Truss paid a second visit to the think tank in 2019, praising it for being at “forefront of Republican thinking” in a speech given at its Washington DC headquarters – just two weeks after she was promoted to international trade secretary.

Truss, who is the favourite among Conservative Party members to succeed Boris Johnson, asked senior representatives from Heritage “what can we learn from ‘Reaganomics’ on things like regulation and red tape”, according to a briefing note for the meeting obtained by Unearthed.

The then chief Treasury secretary planned to tell the lobby group that she was “committed to” and “personally interested in... exploring supply side reforms” – which could include corporate tax cuts and slashing environmental regulations – in the UK, the documents revealed.

Truss also met with several other controversial lobby groups during her trips to the US including the American Enterprise Institute, the Cato Institute and the American Legislative Exchange Council.

Between them, they have received \$712m of money from the biggest funders of climate denial in the US, which include the billionaire industrialists David and Charles Koch, between 2003 and 2018, according to climate researchers.

The brothers own Koch Industries, one of the largest privately held conglomerates in the United States. The business, which owns thousands of miles of oil and gas pipelines as well as petrochemical factories, processes 800,000 barrels of oil per day.

In 2018, Truss also met representatives of the Cato Institute, co-founded by Charles Koch, which climate researchers say “wrote the playbook” for anti-climate action campaigns.

Riley Dunlap, a professor at the Oklahoma State University who has spent decades tracking climate denial groups, said organisations like the Cato Institute have “had a major impact on US policy-making in general, and on climate change in particular”.

“Truss’s ties to these lobby groups are a bad omen for climate change policy making in the UK should she win election,” he told openDemocracy. “She’ll keep the Tories from doing anything helpful unless really pressured, which seems unlikely.”

Many of the think tanks that Truss met played a key role in forcing Obama to abandon what was to be his signature piece of climate policy in 2009.

The American Clean Energy and Security Act would have set an overall cap on greenhouse emissions, but never made it to a final vote in the Senate – despite passing through the House – after an organised backlash against it.

Philips, who co-authored the doomed bill, recalls that groups like Cato and Heritage, both of which have championed Truss, filled the airways with warnings that the regulations threatened the country’s freedom and prosperity. Heritage’s claim that a million jobs would be lost if it passed was regularly cited by opponents – as was Cato’s narrative that the law was an onerous tax on working Americans. No major climate legislation has made it through Congress since.

Just a month after Truss' 2018 US tour, the lobby groups she met published an "ideal UK-US free trade deal" drafted together with several pro-Brexit UK think tanks that proposed gutting consumer and environmental regulations.

The draft was organised by the Initiative for Free Trade (IFT), a think tank founded by the longtime Eurosceptic MEP Daniel Hannan, one of the leaders of Vote Leave, and included the input of several opaquely funded UK organisations including the Institute for Economic Affairs and the Adam Smith Institute.

Hannan later likened the collaboration to a scene from the 1979 film *The Warriors* where rival street gangs plan to join forces to control New York together.

"Those who know the film will remember the scene where Cyrus is making the speech with all the different gangs... It was like that. We had Heritage next to the American Enterprise Institute, the Competitive Enterprise Institute next to the Cato Institute, et cetera," he said during a Heritage webinar together with Matthew Elliott, founder of UK lobby group Taxpayers' Alliance.

Vote Leave co-founder Douglas Carlswell, who was also on the panel, said the draft trade deal would scrap European Union consumer regulations as well as a raft of environmental standards.

"We need to break free from [the EU's] destructive regulatory orbits, if we are to make sure that we prosper, if our children are going to prosper... And that can only be achieved by regulatory realignment [with the US], getting rid of a lot of regulations on everything from vacuum cleaners to diesel engines," he said.

Truss has similarly pledged a "red tape bonfire" of EU laws as part of her leadership pitch. Last week, she said she would scrap any rules retained after Brexit which "hinder our businesses" by the end of 2023.

While she has said she would keep the UK's commitment to reach net zero by 2050, she has also promised to cut green levies from energy bills and lift the ban on fracking.

Opening the NHS to foreign competition

As well as deregulation, the US think tanks' "ideal deal" also proposed that "health services would benefit from foreign competition", acknowledging that "any change to existing regulations would be extremely controversial".

NHS campaigners Keep Our NHS Public said Truss was the latest in a long line of Conservative MPs who have been "hobnobbing" with "the Trump camp".

"Liz Truss has been plotting for a very 'special relationship' with US corporate interests," warned co-chair Tony O'Sullivan.

“The risk is clear – we have seen US company Centene Corporation exposed for its takeover of 500,000 GP patients and found to be using unsupervised ‘physician associates’, cheaper and less skilled than the doctor GPs they are replacing.”

Truss had advocated for private companies to be more involved in providing NHS services long before her visits to the US.

Back in 2012, she co-authored a book, ‘Britannia Unchained’, together with then fellow backbench MPs Kwasi Kwarteng, Priti Patel, Dominic Raab and Chris Skidmore, which accused the public of being “among the worst idlers in the world”.

The authors spelled out a libertarian political manifesto for the Conservative Party, then led by David Cameron, and recommended following Canada’s healthcare system as an example, by combining “universal coverage paid for by the Government with private provision of the actual services”.

This week, the government was urged to start charging NHS patients for hospital stays by a “radical” UK think tank that includes several investment bankers and the founder of a healthcare tech company on its board.

The service is staring down a staffing black hole, and doctors and campaigners have warned that it is underfunded by tens of billions of pounds.