



## Tommy Robinson and the impact of the super-rich on UK politics

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Over the last few years Tommy Robinson has gone from being a marginal character in the far right to a prominent figure with over one million Facebook followers. He's also supported with lavish donations in the UK and overseas.

It's hard to think of anyone else that has so rapidly gone from being a convicted football thug to a worldwide known political figure. Tommy Robinson, whose real name is Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, set up the extreme right Islamophobic English Defence League back in 2009. He has always denied being a racist and claims he does not worry about the colour of someone's skin. But he is strongly opposed to Islamist ideology, although he claims not to be opposed to Muslims as people. This claim was undermined when he was recorded on film saying "*Somalis are backward barbarians,*" and British Muslims are "*enemy combatants who want to kill you, maim you and destroy you.*" The film also shows him claiming that refugees are "*raping their way through the country.*"

In 2017 Robinson began campaigning against what he called "*grooming gangs,*" appearing outside the courts and denouncing the defendants because of their religion and warning that their abuse had been covered up. He was arrested for contempt of court, and within just one day £20,000 in donations were raised to support him.

The following year Robinson was arrested again outside a court in Leeds, for contempt of court, after placing a live video on Facebook about a child exploitation trial. He was briefly jailed, and while his case was appealed his supporters staged a mass demonstration in London in July that turned violent. It was the largest right-wing demonstration since the 1970s and it was funded by a think tank in the US called Middle East Forum.

One of the activists present was Avi Yemini who denounced Islam as a barbaric ideology and claimed it had taken over England. Another speaker was Carl Benjamin who was revealed to have sent the Labour MP Jess Phillips a tweet threatening rape. Benjamin has over 880,000 YouTube subscribers and has posted videos denouncing not just Islam but feminism. He has now enrolled as a member of UKIP.

Although Robinson depicts himself as a mere underdog whose campaign against Islam has been suppressed by the establishment, he is now receiving more funding from right-wing groups than anyone else in Britain.

His growing prominence led to him being appointed as an official adviser to the UKIP party by its leader Gerard Batten, who supported the Westminster demo. In response its previous, and immensely popular leader, Nigel Farage resigned from the party after 25 years of active support, along with other prominent members.

The dramatic rise of Robinson from a marginal far-right fringe to now being followed by millions across the world shows the worrying growth of the far-right in current politics. He is now getting financial support from think tanks in the USA and Australia. This was revealed following an investigation by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, commissioned by the Guardian newspaper, that forty percent of the tweets supporting Robinson came from the US as opposed to only thirty percent from the UK. Others were also flooding in from Holland, Canada and nine other countries.

Robinson admits he has received several hundred thousand pounds in donations, but the Guardian investigation raised disturbing issues about the groups funding him. The US think tank Middle East Forum admits it has given \$60,000 to support his legal fees and the London demo. The Guardian also revealed that the Middle East Forum, and other groups that supported Robinson, have themselves received nearly \$5 million from four US foundations. A key supporter of these foundations is New York department store heiress, Nina Rosenwald, who gave \$2.9 million. She is the president of the Gatestone Institute which regularly runs articles supporting Robinson online. Gatestone is also supported by the family of Robert Mercer, a hedge fund boss who was a key funder of Donald Trump's presidential campaign. The Foundation of Richard Mellon Scaife, a late billionaire who donated generously to conservative causes, gave \$575,000 to the David Horowitz Freedom Centre, which frequently runs articles supporting Robinson.

The idea that American billionaires can impact on our politics in any way is profoundly wrong and the UK government should pass a law to ban all foreign funding in our domestic politics.

Two of the richest Americans, David and Charles Koch, who are worth \$120 billion have not been seen before to be funding organisations in Britain but the Guardian's George Monbiot revealed on December 7 that the Charles Koch Foundation had transferred money to a company that appears to be the US funding arm of a British organisation funding a magazine called Spiked.

The politics of Charles Koch were revealed back in 1978 when he wrote: *"Our movement must destroy the prevalent statist paradigm."* He argues for lower taxes and deregulating businesses, yet his own company has faced massive fines for illegal emissions, ammonia pollution and oil spills. The company was found guilty in 1999 of using a corroded pipeline carrying butane which exploded and killed two people.

The Koch brothers set up the Mercatus Centre, the Cato Institute and Americans For Prosperity and over the years they have spent hundred of millions of dollars supporting those organisations that share their right-wing views. They provided vital support for the Tea Party but then moved

on to support Trump by funding his transition team. Not surprisingly Trump's administration has dramatically reduced taxes on large corporations such as those owned by the Koch brothers.

In the last two years the Charles Koch Foundation gave \$300,000 to support Spiked which has denounced George Soros, Jeremy Corbyn and Black Lives Matter. It also denounced those campaigning for feminism and environmental issues. It provides strong support for the far-right columnist Katie Hopkins, Tommy Robinson, Aaron Banks, Toby Young and Viktor Orban (Hungary's right-wing prime minister). It has consistently supported a hard Brexit without a deal.

It's not illegal for Tommy Robinson to be getting funding from non-British political organisations but it could have a major impact on British politics. Robinson is a hard-line supporter of Brexit and Britain remains deeply divided on this crucial issue. If Robinson has enough money to mobilise his supporters to increase pressure on MPs to leave Europe without a deal the consequences for our economy could be severely damaging and lead to a surge of support for the far-right as unemployment increases following Brexit.

In the last ten years the thousand richest families in Britain have seen their wealth double while working class and middle class families have struggled to cope with savage cuts in services, and wages not keeping up with inflation. The same has happened in the USA and across the world, giant corporations have seen their profits continue to grow. It's no surprise that the super-rich are spending hundreds of millions to influence government policies and it's time that we campaign to force our governments to make this illegal, and supporting figures like Tommy Robinson needs to be stopped.