

The Sydney Morning Herald

Australian Taxpayers Alliance under scrutiny over election role

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The right-wing Australian Taxpayers' Alliance is under pressure to detail the source of funds it deployed during this year's federal election, in the face of claims it lacks transparency and has close ties with a network of foreign-backed political lobby groups.

The alliance used an app favoured by conservative lobbies in the US and Britain to campaign against then Labor leader Bill Shorten in the May 2019 federal election.

So far it has not registered itself as a "third party" with the Australian Electoral Commission, despite its involvement in the campaign, and its books remain closed to the public because it is a private company.

The alliance's stated aim is to "shift Australian political debate in a small government direction," using the "latest in web 2.0 technologies" as well as traditional advocacy.

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It has until the middle of November to register with the AEC if its election spending exceeded the \$13,800 cap set by the commission for third parties. However, it has not yet revealed whether it will seek such registration.

In response to questions from the *Herald*, the alliance would not reveal how much it paid the US developer of the app, saying this was "commercial in confidence".

Founder Tim Andrews resides in Washington and works as the executive director of a powerful allied American lobby group, the Taxpayers Protection Alliance, which shares the ATA's low-taxing and anti "nanny state" agenda.

Despite his American domicile and lobbying role in Washington, Mr Andrews still holds the post of ATA president as well as being sole director and shareholder of its corporate vehicle here, the Australian Taxpayers Alliance Pty Ltd.

Australian federal electoral law bans foreign donations, but appears to have no issue with a key executive of an overseas lobby group also holding office in a domestic political organisation which seeks to influence the outcome of Australian elections.

Asked if it had a role in this situation, the AEC told the *Herald*, "the internal structure of Australian organisations does not fall within the remit of the Electoral Act".

Mr Andrews told the *Herald* from Washington that raising the question of his dual roles was “utterly contemptible” and “tinged with pretty obvious nativism”.

“To say that, because at the end of last year I relocated to the United States to allow my wife to pursue career opportunities ... I should suddenly stop caring about the country I grew up in and deeply love is ... not just the height of stupidity but ethically repulsive.”

He said his role with ATA was now “limited to oversight”.

The spotlight has fallen on the alliance's finances after a submission to parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters by progressive umbrella group, the Tax Justice Network.

The network, which includes organisations like the ACTU, Caritas, GetUp! and Friends of the Earth, has urged the parliamentary committee to investigate the ATA's funding sources, claiming the alliance is part of a “network of organisations that has close links to foreign backed political lobby groups”.

The TJN has zeroed in on the links between the ATA, its affiliated organisations and the vaping movement.

The alliance's Sydney-based executive director Brian Marlow also heads up Legalise Vaping Australia, the nation's “largest pro-vaping advocacy group” which wants nicotine in vaping products to become legal without prescription – a goal shared by tobacco companies.

In the US, Mr Andrews is the public voice of lobbying efforts by the Taxpayers Protection Alliance to thwart the Trump Administration's plans to outlaw flavoured vaping products, which health authorities there have linked to serious lung disease.

A TJN spokesman, tax analyst Jason Ward, said “the championing by the ATA of a pro-tobacco industry agenda and the funding by big tobacco of US groups closely aligned with the ATA raises serious concerns.

"The public has a right to know where the funding comes from."

But Mr Andrews told the *Herald* that “despite the wild allegations of tin-foil-hat wearing conspiracy theorists” the ATA did not receive donations from “the Koch [brothers] Network, Big Oil and the tobacco industry ... [or] any foreign funding for any of our political activities.”

He conceded that "we do receive some access to a social media consultant via BAT [British American Tobacco] who we are happy to occasionally take advice from."

"We have also received some airfares from international non-profits to attend training conferences as well as some sponsorships to allow students to attend our annual Friedman conference."

Mr Marlow said Legalise Vaping took money from individual vaping shops but not tobacco companies.

The ATA lists 10 staff, yet is not registered for GST which means its turnover does not exceed \$150,000 a year. Asked how it could afford 10 staff, Mr Marlow said some were unpaid interns, some were part-time and some contractors. He said staff costs were an “internal” matter but insisted they were below \$150,000 annually.

Asked about his organisation’s overall budget, he said it was “somewhere between heaps and a lot” sourced from “thousands” of “hard-working Australians”.

Mr Andrews, 36, is highly networked with other conservative organisations in Australia and overseas. He sits on the board of the HR Nicholls Society, the Australian Libertarian Society, and co-convenes the Friedman conference, described as “the largest libertarian conference in the Asia-Pacific”. Menzies House and MyChoice Australia are other conservatively aligned ATA projects.

Mr Andrews has previously worked for the libertarian Cato Institute in the US and is an alumni of the Koch associates program, set up by billionaire industrialists David and Charles Koch, whose pet causes in the US have included attacking climate science and championing lower taxes. He also sits on the pro-Brexit UK Taxpayers Alliance Advisory Council.

The ATA’s digital media consultant, Marko Horg, has a key role with the Washington-based IGO Watch (aimed at intergovernmental organisations like the UN) which was set up by the Taxpayers Protection Alliance last year. Mr Andrews said Mr Horg’s work for the ATA and the TPA was paid for separately by each.