



A Right-Wing Think Tank Is Behind the Controversial Great Barrington Declaration Calling for COVID-19 Herd Immunity

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An open letter that emerged earlier this month opposing COVID-19 shutdowns and calling for a “herd immunity” approach to addressing the coronavirus — which already has claimed over 220,000 American lives — is one of the latest examples of how right-wing ideology and think tanks that have long cultivated climate science denial are now engaging in COVID disinformation and promoting messaging dangerous to public health.

Known as the Great Barrington Declaration, this statement advocating for herd immunity was introduced in early October at an event hosted by the American Institute for Economic Research, a conservative free-market think tank located in the western Massachusetts town of Great Barrington. This think tank, funded in part through a corporate investment firm with holdings in major oil and petrochemical companies, operates a network for the international business community that partners with other institutions backed by Koch and fossil fuel cash.

The herd immunity strategy, which the open letter describes as a “focused protection” approach, basically calls for allowing this highly infectious virus to spread throughout the population, in theory infecting enough individuals while somehow protecting the most vulnerable such as the elderly from getting sick in order to allow a resumption of daily life. Such a strategy would inevitably result in more deaths — by some estimates the American death toll would likely rise to between 1 million and 2.5 million — and is far from guaranteed from even reaching the intended goal of broad immunity.

Yet this is the strategy that has apparently garnered favor under the Trump administration. One of the administration’s leading medical advisors on the coronavirus, Dr. Scott Atlas, is openly promoting herd immunity. President Trump himself continues to downplay the virus threat, holding large rallies defying public health measures, and even making unfounded claims that he is now personally immune after contracting the virus.

“From a public health and ethical viewpoint, the fact that the Great Barrington Declaration is now the Trump administration’s official policy is deeply troubling,” Dr. Gavin Yamey, a physician and professor of global health and public policy at Duke University, wrote October 14 in TIME. Yamey says this “letting the virus rip” approach is “dangerous and inhumane.”

The vast majority of experts in public health and epidemiology agree. The Infectious Diseases Society of America issued a statement denouncing the Great Barrington Declaration, calling the herd immunity strategy to COVID-19 “inappropriate, irresponsible, and ill-informed.” A similar statement came from 20 public health organizations that say the declaration is “not grounded in science and is dangerous.” The Director-General of the World Health Organization said during

an October 12 media briefing: “Never in the history of public health has herd immunity been used as a strategy for responding to an outbreak, let alone a pandemic. It is scientifically and ethically problematic.”

The Great Barrington Declaration has over 30 original co-signers from around the globe, some with listed expertise in epidemiology and others with medical or science specializations unrelated to an infectious virus like the novel coronavirus. According to the declaration’s website, there are more than 11,000 signatures from those who self-identified as medical and public health scientists, over 31,000 signatures from self-identified medical practitioners, and over 580,000 signatures from “concerned citizens.”

However, some of the signatures are fake (Dr. Johnny Bananas?), as The Guardian points out, though the Declaration claims that they make up less than 1 percent of the total and that most have been removed from the count tracker.

But as investigative journalist Nafeez Ahmed explained in an article published in the London-based news site Byline Times, there appears to be no vetting process to verify the medical and scientific credentials of signatories. Ahmed demonstrated this by signing his name under the Medical and Public Health Scientists category, and was automatically added without verification.

“For a document that is supposed to represent an emerging body of scientific opinion, the lack of vetting is surprising — and indicates that the Great Barrington Declaration is less a genuinely independent scientific enterprise, than a propaganda project,” Ahmed writes.

Remember the Oregon Petition?

This lack of vetting signatories on a controversial petition that endorses contrarian scientific viewpoints is reminiscent of the notorious piece of climate science denial propaganda known as the Oregon Petition.

Published in 1998 by a conspiracy theorist and an Exxon-backed think tank, the Oregon Petition falsely claimed there is no scientific consensus on global warming. Like the Great Barrington Declaration, it also contained fake signatures, including fictional characters and celebrity names, including a member of the British pop band the Spice Girls. And most of the 30,000 or so signatories the petition claims as scientific experts have no expertise in climate science.

The National Academy of Sciences even issued a statement calling out this deliberately misleading petition.

What Is the American Institute for Economic Research?

The institution behind the Great Barrington Declaration, the American Institute for Economic Research (AIER), is a free-market think tank tied to funding from the Koch petrochemical and industrial empire and an investment firm with significant holdings in fossil fuels.

The American Institute for Economic Research (AIER), located in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, describes itself as “one of the oldest and most respected nonpartisan economic research and advocacy organizations in the country” and “dedicated to developing and promoting the ideas of pure freedom and private governance.” However, it is more broadly aligned with libertarian ideology hostile to government intervention and regulatory policies.

AIER operates a program called the Bastiat Society that promotes its free-market, anti-government ideology and partners with other Koch-funded think tanks, networks, and organizations that are some of the most prominent disseminators of disinformation on climate science and climate policies. These include the Atlas Network, State Policy Network, Manhattan Institute, Cato Institute, Charles Koch Institute, Competitive Enterprise Institute, and others.

AIER is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. According to publicly available 990 filings reviewed by DeSmog, the Charles G. Koch Charitable Foundation contributed \$68,100 to the organization in 2018. The Atlas Economic Research Foundation (also known as the Atlas Network), which supports free market think tanks around the world that are known messengers of climate denial, gave \$54,133 to the American Institute for Economic Research in 2018. The Shell Oil Company Foundation has donated a small amount, about \$500 total, between 2013 and 2017.

This free-market think tank has further links to the fossil fuel industry through American Investment Services (AIS), which is a wholly owned subsidiary of the organization. AIS says it is a “separate legal entity” that “conducts its investment advisory business independent of AIER’s day-to-day operations.”

But earnings from this investment firm, valued at nearly \$285 million as of this year, help fund AIER, which appoints the firm’s board of directors.

American Investment Services has holdings in various polluting energy and petrochemical corporations such as Chevron, ExxonMobil, Dow Chemical, Duke Energy, General Electric, and Eversource Energy, as well as tobacco giant Phillip Morris.

Given these financial ties to fossil fuel interests and the fervent “free market” ideology it promotes, it is unsurprising that AIER contributes to misleading messaging around climate change that continues to pollute the public discourse. As Ahmed, the investigative journalist, wrote in the Byline Times, “All its climate change related reports and commentaries are studiously dedicated to downplaying the severity of climate risks and obfuscating the science around human exploitation of oil, gas, and coal in driving current global warming levels.”

Commentary published last year by AIER Senior Fellow Richard M. Ebeling on the think tank’s website, for example, criticized Swedish teen climate activist Greta Thunberg for “supercharging” what Ebeling calls “hyped-up hysteria” on the dangers of global warming.

AIER’s current president is economist Edward P. Stringham, who also is a research fellow with another Koch-backed think tank called the Independent Institute. This organization also tracks in climate denial, is supported with Koch funding, and has received at least \$80,000 from ExxonMobil.

Furthermore, as Ahmed with Byline Times recently reported, AIER works with a PR firm called Emergent Order that is funded by Koch money. IRS filings reveal the PR firm has received \$1.4 million from the Charles Koch Foundation since 2014. According to Byline Times, the PR firm denied that it is involved with AIER’s Great Barrington Declaration.

Dr. Fauci, Other Public Health Experts, Town of Great Barrington Reject the Declaration

Sharp criticism of the statement and the herd immunity proposal it endorses has been issued by media reports, by public health and medical experts in epidemiology including Dr. Anthony Fauci, and even by the Massachusetts town the declaration is named after.

The town of Great Barrington — which is generally progressive, supports a thriving “localist” culture including local food and even local currency, and which Smithsonian Magazine named the best small town in America in 2012 — issued a statement rejecting AIER’s declaration.

“We are a COVID safe community, we are not tossing off our masks,” Town Manager Mark Pruhenski said. “This Declaration has gained national headlines and has created harmful misperceptions — just as we are doing all we can to protect residents, employees, and visitors.”

Dr. Fauci, the nation’s top infectious disease expert who many in the public consider the most trusted source at the national level on information pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic, has dismissed the Great Barrington Declaration and called the idea of building up herd immunity to this virus via widespread infection “nonsense” and “very dangerous.”

Other experts in epidemiology, infectious disease, public health, and related disciplines support Dr. Fauci’s rejection of the herd immunity approach to COVID-19 and have issued a counter statement to the Great Barrington Declaration called the John Snow Memorandum, named after one of the founders of modern epidemiology.

This statement, originally published in the prestigious medical journal The Lancet, already has over 6,400 signatures and all are vetted, according to the statement’s website. “Any pandemic management strategy relying upon immunity from natural infections for COVID-19 is flawed,” the statement argues. The John Snow Memorandum does not explicitly reference the Great Barrington Declaration, but it takes direct aim at the herd immunity approach and its underlying assumptions, calling it a “dangerous fallacy unsupported by scientific evidence.”

AIER 'Doubles Down' Defending Controversial Declaration

The American Institute for Economic Research and its investment firm AIS acknowledge the Great Barrington Declaration has stirred up considerable controversy. But the think tank is staunchly defending the declaration and has attempted to rebut some of the criticism.

AIER did not respond to a request for comment from DeSmog on assertions that the herd immunity approach is dangerous, unscientific, and unethical.

In an op-ed published October 22 in USA Today (and re-posted on AIER’s website), the three medical experts who authored the declaration claim that the approach would “minimize both COVID-19 mortality and lockdown-induced collateral damage” and they blame the more than 220,000 U.S. deaths from the virus on the COVID-19 shutdowns of businesses, schools, and other institutions.

AIER writer and visiting scholar Joakim Book — who has penned articles with titles like “Why Shouldn’t Brazil Burn its Rainforests” and “What Greta Thunberg Forgets About Climate Change” — published a post on the think tank’s website on October 22 that “doubles down” (in his words) on defending the Declaration and bashing serious climate action proposals like the Green New Deal. He decries reporting by what he refers to as “pro-lockdown media” on the Great Barrington Declaration, and he also attacks reporting by “conspiratorial writers” that calls out the think tank's ties to Koch funding.

'Sideline Science'

Several experts in defending scientific integrity told DeSmog that the Great Barrington Declaration fits a pattern of vested economic interests promoting fringe theories and contrarian science to downplay public health and safety risks in areas ranging from tobacco to chemicals to climate pollution.

“Science misinformation has a long history of parading lists of seeming experts rejecting the scientific consensus,” said Dr. John Cook, a research assistant professor studying science denial at the Center for Climate Change Communication at George Mason University. “The tobacco industry perfected this approach, with newspaper ads featuring thousands of doctors endorsing a cigarette brand. Climate deniers compiled a list of tens of thousands of dissenting science graduates, whose numbers paled compared to the total number of people with a science degree. The ‘Great Barrington Declaration’ also uses the misleading technique of ‘magnified minority,’ promoting a list of names to convey the impression of scientific support when the vast bulk of relevant scientific experts says differently. Science denial employs the same rhetorical techniques, whether on the topics of smoking, climate change, or COVID-19.”

Dr. David Michaels, an epidemiologist, professor at the George Washington University School of Public Health, and author of *The Triumph of Doubt: Dark Money and the Science of Deception*, agreed that these techniques, pushed by vested interests, are nothing new.

“It is not a surprise that the Koch network funds questionable interpretations of COVID-19 data that support public policy that elevates economic gain over human life,” added Michaels. “This is the same network that funds mercenary scientists who promote climate denialism and manufacture uncertainty about the health effects of air pollution and toxic chemical exposures.”

Dr. Andrew Rosenberg, director of the Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists, said the public health experts endorsing the Great Barrington Declaration are reminiscent of climate contrarian researchers like Willie Soon, an aerospace engineer who dismisses the role of carbon dioxide in global warming and who has received much of his research funding from the oil and gas industry.

“This is another case where you have a fringe idea and pseudoscience theories being pushed for a political agenda, just like we saw with climate change,” he said. “It’s again sidelining the science.”