



Britain's Trade Advisers Include a Man Who Called Climate Science 'Absolute Crap'

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A group of individuals with a history of downplaying or denying the severity of the climate crisis have been given an outsized role in shaping the future of British trade policy, according to environmental campaigners, who warn that their influence could have serious consequences on efforts to reduce global carbon emissions.

With the British government eager to sign new, post-Brexit trade deals, campaign groups such as Friends of the Earth have raised the alarm about a series of appointments to its newly-created advisory bodies.

Former Australian prime minister Tony Abbott was appointed as an advisor to the recently reconstituted Board of Trade in September of 2020, raising eyebrows across the political spectrum. In 2017, Abbott gave a speech to a think-tank called the Global Warming Policy Foundation (GWPF), in which he doubled down on his previous claim that climate science was "absolute crap", adding that "climate change itself is probably doing good".

But research by the not-for-profit environmental site DeSmog has shown that Abbott's appointment is just the tip of the (rapidly-melting) iceberg. Both he and the GWPF are part of a larger interconnected network of opaquely-funded think-tanks and lobbyists based in and around Westminster's Tufton Street.

These organisations share not just office addresses, but also an overarching neoliberal ideology – a pro-Brexit, anti-regulation approach to trade and governance, which (as the usually pro-free trade *Economist* has noted) often goes hand-in-hand with climate denial, or at least an unhealthy scepticism of the need for strict environmental regulations.

The GWPF, for example – whose offices at 55 Tufton Street once housed the Vote Leave campaign – "is the UK's premier climate science denying group", according to Rachel Sherrington, a researcher and reporter at DeSmog. A spokesperson for the GWPF said it had no set position on climate science, and that its members subscribed to a broad range of views "from the IPCC position through agnosticism to scepticism". Tony Abbott didn't respond to VICE's request for comment.

Daniel Hannan, the ardent Brexiteer and former Conservative MEP, is another individual associated with the Tufton Street network who has recently been appointed to an official advisory role by the Department for International Trade. He joined the government's Board of Trade alongside Tony Abbott last September.

Hannan doesn't deny that climate change is an issue, telling VICE, "The fact that the world is heating is of concern to everyone," but that he believes "the UK's actions on the environment are far more ambitious than most countries', and we should all be proud of that record".

Hannan has previously been critical of spending to mitigate rising global temperatures, and written dismissively about the concerns of school climate strikers. Hannan is the founder of the Initiative for Free Trade, a think-tank that was initially based in 57 Tufton Street, next door to the GWPF. Its website lists Tony Abbott as a member of its international advisory board.

Other recent appointees to government advisory positions include Robert Colvile, the Director of the Centre for Policy Studies, also based in 57 Tufton Street. Like Hannan, Colvile accepts the science behind anthropogenic climate change, but has been critical of demands for climate justice. He is joined on the government's Strategic Trade Advisory Group by Matthew Kilcoyne of the Adam Smith Institute (ASI), who's previously questioned the scientific basis for climate change on Twitter, and Mark Littlewood, director of the Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA), a think-tank that has received funding from BP for more than 50 years.

Spokespeople for the IEA and the Adam Smith Institute said, separately, that neither organisation questions that climate change is happening. Both pointed to publications arguing that free markets would provide solutions, accompanied by a carbon tax (and, in the case of the IEA, a tax on trains). Matthew Kilcoyne of the ASI didn't respond directly to a question about his climate science tweet. Mark Littlewood challenged VICE to a debate for the IEA's YouTube channel.

Even if these people are not personally sceptical of climate science, environmental campaigners still have concerns about the dominance of deregulatory voices on the government's advisory panels.

"The people the Department for International Trade have appointed as advisors in various capacities have demonstrated a real bias towards low regulation, low standard, lowest common denominator trade," says Kierra Box, the Trade Campaigner for Friends of the Earth. She warns that their influence, combined with "a lack of dissenting voices", could seriously impact efforts to uphold the UK's environmental standards in upcoming trade negotiations with Australia and the US.

Yet, the appointment of individuals who favour freer markets over stricter environmental regulation isn't exactly surprising, according to Rachel Sherrington, because the Secretary of State for Trade herself, Liz Truss, has advocated a similar deregulatory "free trade" approach.

"It's a very Trussian style of politics, this free-market, American-inspired, pro-deregulation, libertarian style of politics," says Sherrington, "and she has close relationships with many of these think-tanks."

Truss took multiple meetings with the IEA last year, which were then deleted from her department's transparency record, before being later reinstated after media accusations of a cover-up. She's previously spoken at the Adam Smith Institute's Christmas Party, and appeared on a panel alongside Daniel Hannan and Shanker Singham, another individual associated with the Tufton Street Network, last September.

The event was hosted by the Heritage Foundation, an American organisation listed by Greenpeace as a “Koch Industries climate denial front group”. In 2018, Truss met with representatives from the Cato Institute and the American Enterprise Institute - both of which also receive funding from Koch Industries, and appear on Greenpeace’s list of climate denial front groups. Meanwhile, her previous record in government includes the ending of state subsidies to solar farms, which she labelled “a blight on the landscape”.

When contacted for comment, a spokesperson for the Department for International Trade didn’t directly address Liz Truss’ connections with the American think-tanks, but reiterated that she was not immediately aware that her IEA meetings had been removed from transparency records. The spokesperson added: “The UK was one of the first governments in the world to set a net zero target by 2050,” and said “as part of our G7 presidency we will be working closely with international partners to enhance and promote sustainable trade, as we join forces to protect our planet”.

Campaigners, however, believe the government’s approach to trade is directly undermining its claims to international climate leadership ahead of the COP26 summit later this year. They also dispute the government’s claim that their trade advisory panels include individuals with a diverse range of views. “When you look at the relative lack of environmental group representation on key groups, *that’s* what’s ringing alarm bells,” says Rachel Sherrington.

Kierra Box of Friends of the Earth agrees: “We’ve noted on a number of occasions that the Strategic Trade Advisory Group is really dominated by business interests.” She also points out that the balance is even more skewed on individual sector Trade Advisory Groups – covering industries like transport or the agri-food sector – which are hugely significant sources of emissions.

The Strategic Trade Advisory Group does now include Shaun Spiers, a representative from Greener UK, a coalition of 13 environmental organisations that includes Friends of the Earth.

“But he’s now the only cross-environment representative on a group with fairly large membership,” says Box. The other members, meanwhile, are “all kind of worryingly in agreement that high environmental standards and strong regulation are protectionism, and that the future of trade policy should be one of increasing amounts of deregulatory trade”.

It’s hard to quantify exactly how much influence these various advisory groups have already had over the UK’s trade policy, not least because the “summaries of discussions” published by the Department for International Trade are cursory at best. But the progress of the Trade Bill 2019-21 through Parliament gives a pretty good indication of where the government’s priorities now lie.

Last Tuesday, at the urging of Liz Truss’ deputy Greg Hands, the Conservative majority in the House of Commons rejected a whole series of amendments proposed by the House of Lords. The rejection of the legal clauses that would have prevented the government from putting the NHS on the table in negotiations, or signing trade agreements with countries accused of genocide, made headlines. But perhaps no less important was the rejection of an amendment designed to legally bind the government into maintaining existing environmental standards.

At the same time, the government rejected an amendment that would give Parliament a final say over any future trade deal – standard practice in many countries, including the US – raising further fears about the lack of scrutiny in the negotiating process. “Whoever’s negotiating it, there should be *some* kind of scrutiny,” says Sherrington.

But if the lack of transparency is worrying for climate campaigners, the potential outcomes of the deals on the horizon – with the US and Australia, for example – are worse.

“At best,” says Kierra Box, “our trade agreements are going to be entirely unhelpful in solving the climate crisis that we’re facing. At worst, and more likely, they’re going to increasingly inhibit us – both in terms of taking domestic action, and in working around the world to support other nations in adapting and mitigating the effects of climate change.”