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Britain: The rightwing defence of 'academic freedom' masks a McCarthyite agenda

Wednesday 2 September 2020, by [PORTES Jonathan](#) (Date first published: 4 August 2020).

Are rightwing academics being silenced? The Policy Exchange thinktank says they are - and it has plans for cracking down.

Another day, another skirmish in Britain's culture war. Once again, universities have found themselves on the frontline. According to a report from the thinktank Policy Exchange, [Academic Freedom in the UK](#), pro-Brexit and rightwing academics are being "forced to hide their views".

The report cites a [YouGov poll](#) of 820 academics, which found that 32% of those who identify their political views as "right" or "fairly right" have "stopped openly airing opinions in teaching and research". On the surface, these numbers sound legitimate - but simple statistical detective work tells us that this equates to no more than about 10 academics currently employed at UK universities. The survey has been padded out with a large proportion of retired academics, and the report itself is littered with [basic statistical errors](#).

This group of 10 or so academics presumably includes the "Tory leaver" respondent [who claimed](#) to have been threatened by their university's marketing department for not "explicitly condemning conservatism as immoral" in a journal article. The poor soul was also told that "remaining impartial" would entail disciplinary action. To be fair, it's not just leavers who are persecuted; one "centrist remainder" was apparently removed from a programme after they failed to show sufficient deference towards a photograph of Jeremy Corbyn on a manager's desk. That the authors were apparently gullible or lazy enough to print these responses, which seem to me like deliberate piss-takes, tells us all we need to know about the report's credibility.

But while both the report and its recommendations are laughable, that doesn't mean we shouldn't take them seriously. One of the authors, Eric Kaufmann, from the politics department at Birkbeck, University of London, recently called on students and others [to report academics](#) for engaging in "politically motivated" attempts to "alter the curriculum". Who will judge whether such alterations are acceptable? None other than Policy Exchange, under the auspices of its new [History Matters project](#).

It all sounds a bit McCarthyite, doesn't it? In principle, just about any new addition or minor change to the curriculum could be deemed "politically motivated" - from replacing Shakespeare on the curriculum with Stormzy, to my own attempts, when devising a course on the economics and politics of UK immigration, to inject more sources into the curriculum and develop perspectives from different countries.

Perhaps the thought police really are stalking the corridors of the ivory tower - but they aren't the same people that the Policy Exchange report identifies. It turns out that academic freedom is only good when your views are defined as acceptable by a rightwing thinktank with [close links to](#)

[Downing Street.](#)

Conflicts between politicians (especially, but by no means always, on the right) and academia are nothing new. And given who provides the funding, government and society have a legitimate interest in what academics do, and how we do it. What's different here, however, is a concerted push by some academics and thinktanks to misrepresent how universities actually work, in order to impose from the outside their own conception of "diversity", and their own definition, enforced by government diktat, of what is and what is not acceptable. Now that is genuinely "chilling".

Leaving this hypocrisy aside, we can all agree that we don't want legitimate research stifled. But what are we actually talking about here when we speak of "stifling research"? Helpfully, Policy Exchange are not afraid to elaborate. Suppose a colleague of mine at King's announced that her new research project would investigate the hypothesis that Jews are genetically predisposed to care more about money than non-Jews. How should I respond?

The report argues that I must assume that she is acting in "good faith". Since propagating racist beliefs is not a "wise career path", it's illogical of me to think that she's interested in anything other than the noble pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. (It's worth noting here that Kaufmann has proposed tweaking the new UK immigration system to give [white people extra "points"](#), as well as asking us to consider which aspects of the "white genocide" theory are in fact correct. I can't help observing that his career doesn't seem to have suffered.)

To insulate this researcher from people like me, who might irrationally conclude that the university would be better off without her research, the report suggests creating a new position, a "director for academic freedom" at the Office for Students. They would be empowered to investigate alleged infringements of academic freedom - yet such breaches wouldn't be confined to somebody suggesting that a certain research topic is not appropriate for a modern university. Suppose you're just not very good at your job, in the eyes of your colleagues and peers. Could you be dismissed (or even denied promotion) for "low-grade scholarship"? No, according to Policy Exchange. Such a move would be the thin end of the wedge, as "other academics may be willing to let such a judgment be swayed by political disagreement".

In other words, Policy Exchange demands that I should be allowed to spend all day ranting on Twitter about my persecution by the leftwing academic establishment (or indeed about the iniquities of Brexit or how VAR has ruined football), pausing only to churn out the occasional [article for UnHerd](#) about how terribly unfair it all is. And, when my colleagues gently suggest that I ought to do some serious research or be replaced by someone who will, the Office for Students will step in to defend me. Maybe I shouldn't complain - but I can't see how that can be good news for our universities.

The institute, and the other lobby groups Fisher founded, honed the arguments that would be used to strip down the state, curtail public welfare and public protection, and restrict and undermine other forms of social cohesion, releasing the ultra-rich from the constraints of democracy. Unsurprisingly, some of the richest people on Earth poured cash into his project.

His groups translated Hayek's ideas, seen by many as repulsive, into a new political common sense - producing the reframings and justifications on which Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan built their revolutions.

Others began to copy this model. Madsen Pirie, the founder of the Adam Smith Institute, describes [in his autobiography](#) how, using funds from 20 of the UK's biggest companies, he helped to chart the course that Thatcher took. Every Saturday, while she was in opposition, staff from the Adam Smith

Institute and the Institute of Economic Affairs sat down for lunch with Conservative party researchers, and leader writers and columnists from the Times and Telegraph, to plot out her rise to power. They “planned strategy for the week ahead”, and would “co-ordinate our activities to make us more effective collectively”. Pirie describes how he devised many of the policies that defined Thatcherism.

And [elsewhere too](#), not least in the testimony of the Brexit campaign whistleblower [Shahmir Sanni](#), there is evidence that these lobby groups coordinate their work, creating the impression that people in different places are spontaneously coming to the same conclusions. Several of them work from the same offices, in [55 and 57 Tufton Street](#), Westminster.

The lobby group that Boris Johnson’s government uses most is Policy Exchange. While it claims to be a neutral educational charity, it was founded in 2002 by the Conservative MPs Francis Maude and Archie Norman, and Nick Boles, who later also became a Tory MP. Its first chairman was Michael Gove. Its proposals and personnel have been adopted by the Conservative party ever since.

Policy Exchange has played an important role in shifting power away from rival institutions and into the prime minister’s office. For several years it has been building a case for [curtailing the judiciary](#). It [provided the ammunition](#) for the government’s current attack on judicial review, which enables citizens to sue the government to uphold the law. This was the process transparency campaigner Gina Miller used: in 2016 to oblige Theresa May to seek parliamentary approval for triggering the Brexit process; and, last year, to overturn Boris Johnson’s [suspension of parliament](#).

Policy Exchange calls such rulings “judicial overreach”. It claims they threaten the sovereignty of parliament and the separation of powers between government and judiciary. To my mind they do the opposite. The law is not whatever Boris Johnson says it is: it is legislation passed by parliament and interpreted by the courts. Both the Miller cases returned powers to parliament that prime ministers had seized. The government has now appointed a former Conservative minister, Lord Faulks, to [examine judicial review](#), along the lines suggested by Policy Exchange.

This lobby group [has called for](#) the prime minister’s office to have greater powers “to develop and direct policy change” through the civil service, and to appoint leaders of public bodies whose “culture and values” align with government’s aims. It has led the public attacks on what it calls the “chilling effects” of [leftwing views in academia](#). Its recent report on academic freedom was [brilliantly eviscerated](#) in the Guardian by Jonathan Portes, who found it riddled with basic statistical errors and mistaken assumptions. What purports to be a campaign for intellectual freedom looks more like a McCarthyite attempt to suppress left-leaning ideas. It’s an effective weapon in the government’s gathering culture war.

Policy Exchange’s proposals for [changing the planning system](#), which involve a massive removal of power from local authorities, have been [adopted wholesale](#) by the government. One of the authors of this scheme, Jack Airey, has moved from the thinktank to Downing Street, as a special adviser.

Last year, Policy Exchange published a polemic that [claimed Extinction Rebellion](#) is led by dangerous extremists. As usual, it was widely covered by the media. Less discussed was the report that the lobby group [has received funding](#) from the power company Drax, the trade association Energy UK, and the gas companies E.ON and Cadent, whose fossil-fuel investments are threatened by environmental activism. These are among the few funders whose identities we know. Policy Exchange is listed by [Who Funds You?](#) as among the UK’s most opaque thinktanks. It might seem remarkable that without having to reveal its funders, while promoting shifts that could harm civil society, Policy Exchange remains a [registered charity](#).

Conservative governments clearly attach great importance to the way charities are overseen. In 2018, a parliamentary committee sent the government an [unprecedented letter](#), pointing out that the government's preferred candidate as chair of the Charity Commission, the former Tory minister Baroness Stowell, was "unable to demonstrate ... any real insight, knowledge or vision"; could not be seen as neutral; and had failed to withstand the committee's scrutiny. The government appointed her anyway, and she remains chair today.

By such means, political life is steadily undermined, until little remains but authority and obedience to the prime minister. Without strong civic institutions, society loses its power. From the point of view of global capital, that's mission accomplished. To resist the government's machinations, first we must understand them.

Jonathan Portes

P.S.

- The Guardian. Tue 4 Aug 2020 11.00 BST. Last modified on Tue 4 Aug 2020 16.12 BST
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<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/aug/04/rightwing-academic-freedom-policy-exchange-thinktank>
- Jonathan Portes is professor of economics and public policy at King's College London and a former senior civil servant.
- This article was amended on 4 August 2020. Eric Kaufmann is a professor in the politics department at Birkbeck, University of London, but is not head of department as an earlier version said. This has been corrected.
- Jonathan Portes is professor of economics and public policy at King's College London and a former senior civil servant.
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