

FREE THINKING: THE ROLE OF POLICY EXCHANGE IN THE ENGLISH FREE SCHOOLS POLICY

I. Introduction

On Monday 9th March, 2015, the centre-right British think tank Policy Exchange launched its report *A Rising Tide*. In this, Natasha Porter and Jonathon Simons argued for the “competitive benefits” of the free schools model, a policy introduced by the Conservative Party five years earlier.¹ On the very same morning, the Prime Minister David Cameron, announced both the creation of another 49 free schools (joining the 255 already commissioned during his five years in office), and his intentions to open a further 500 if he was re-elected in the May General Election.²

The coinciding of these two events was, of course, no coincidence. In the United Kingdom, policy think tanks span the political spectrum and often have close relationships with key governmental players who share similar partisan beliefs. Political parties are frequently seen drawing upon the research and innovation of think tanks when designing and promoting new policies, while also referring to their “independent” findings to chart the successes and failures of existing ones. And yet, although this close relationship is acknowledged and even accepted (in some areas at least), little research has been done to unpick its exact nature, and to evaluate how the relationship is understood in non-specialist spheres. This paper looks to begin this task, in a very specific case: that of Policy Exchange (PX), the British Conservative Party, and the free schools policy.

After providing some brief context to the free school model, this paper will provide an introduction to the 2015 report, and how it was both used by politicians and the media, and received by academics and those involved in education. It will then look to explore the roots of its findings in the context of PX’s educational research over the course of its 13-year history, before evaluating the organisation as

¹ Policy Exchange. 2015. *A Rising Tide: The Competitive Benefits of Free Schools*

² Cameron, David. “Free schools announcement: David Cameron’s speech”, 9th March 2015. gov.uk.

a whole and situating their findings within this important contextual background. Finally it will analyse - and question - the role that think tanks play in modern British politics and look to reassess how we understand the “thinking” going on within these influential organisations.

Before this analysis is begun, it is important to state that, although PX and the Conservative Party are the focus, this is only due to the limited scope of the current paper, and the fact that they have been so vocal in promoting this particular policy. This should not be seen as a targeted critique of this particular - or unique - relationship, but rather that it is considered somewhat of a microcosm through which to draw out common themes of a more general think tank culture. Similar conclusions could no doubt be made across time, and allegiances. Many have drawn attention to the close relationships between Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government and the Adam Smith Institute,³ while others look to the ideological support provided by “Tony’s cronies” (including Demos and the Institute for Public Policy Research [IPPR]) during the rise of New Labour in the 1990s,⁴ which the *Guardian* has argued “remade the party by both propelling it forward and giving it ideological ballast”.⁵

As such, although this analysis focusses on the right, its conclusions are non-partisan, and demand that we reassess the power of think tanks in legitimising policy across the political spectrum.

II. Choice, Academies, and Free Schools

Before we look at the free schools model, it is important to have a grasp on the basic system of school choice which exists in the UK. The 1988 Education Reform Act gave parents the opportunity to state their preference about which school their child attended, and the Local Educational Authority (LEA) -

³ Denham, Andrew and Mark Garnett. 1998. *British think-tanks and the climate of opinion* (London; Bristol: UCL Press)

⁴ Bentham, Justin. 2006. “The IPPR and Demos: Think Tanks of the New Social Democracy”, *The Political Quarterly* 77(2): 166-174

⁵ Williams, Zoe. “Brains for hire: the thinktank”, *The Guardian*, 27th October 2010

who administered the admissions process - came to be held accountable for making sure that students were not refused admission to a school unless it was completely full.⁶

Despite garnering interest on an international level,⁷ this change has been viewed as largely inconsequential. In practice, as many have noted, it did not have a significant effect on parental potential to shape their child's educational trajectory, as, even now, popular schools are oversubscribed, and every year there is an outcry as large numbers of children are only granted entry to their third and fourth choice schools. In theory, meanwhile, the change was not part of a determined move towards the marketisation of education, despite the similarities it had with some of the proposals of John Chubb and Terry Moe. This is demonstrated in the fact that, as well as introducing this element of "choice" to schooling, the 1988 Act also introduced a "National Curriculum" (NC), which sought to standardise the content of syllabi in all state-funded schools. This is important: in one fell swoop, England, Wales, and Northern Ireland embraced choice as a basic principle of education, while also welcoming a measure that served to limit the differences between schools. This is demonstrative of the fact that, at its initial stages of its choice policy, the UK did not pioneer competition as a feature of its educational landscape.

This changed in 2000 with the Academies Programme, which was created by the Labour Party and ended up - largely accidentally - paving the way for the free schools model. This programme created a different type of school in England;⁸ these new "academies" were independent of Local Authority control and, as such, had increased autonomy over many aspects of education, including curriculum,

⁶ Admissions to oversubscribed schools came to be decided by the LEA in accordance with the school's individual admissions criteria which may prioritise applicants who: (a) have a sibling at the school, (b) are of a particular religion, (c) went to a "feeder" primary school, or (d) live close to the school. Every school is required to prioritise children who are in care. See Gov.uk, "Schools Admissions: 2. Admission criteria", <https://www.gov.uk/schools-admissions/admissions-criteria> [Accessed 28th April, 2015]

⁷ See Chubb, John and Terry Moe. 1992. *A Lesson in school reform from Great Britain* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution)

⁸ Since 1998, control over education in the UK has been a matter for national governments as part of devolution of powers. Academies and free schools are currently an initiative local to England.

pedagogy, and (more recently) pay. Although they have to take the national standardised exams, they do not have to follow the NC. Initially these schools (which could either be set-up from scratch, or converted from an existing school) had to have a private sponsor who contributed at least 10% of the academy's capital costs in order to be authorised, however this is no longer required, as the Conservative government, following their election in May 2010, sought to make the conversion process easier for all schools.

At the same time as lifting restrictions on academy creation, the Conservative government also introduced the second new type of schools to the English education system: free schools. In June 2010, immediately after election, the Education Secretary at the time, Michael Gove, invited community groups to set forth their proposals to establish academy-style independent schools in the areas in which they lived. Referring directly to both the charter schools of the US and the model used in Sweden, he argued that free schools would “enable excellent teachers to create new schools and improve standards for all children... [and give schools] the freedom to innovate and respond directly to parents’ needs”.⁹

Since 2010, more than 300 free schools have been approved, and 171 have opened their doors. However, in general, there is accepted to be no conclusive evidence about their impact as yet. The recent report on academies and free schools by the Education Committee (a body which is appointed by the government to scrutinise the activity of the Department of Education) stated that, due to timing and lack of information, “Current evidence does not allow us to draw conclusions on whether academies in themselves are a positive force for change”; in no uncertain terms it declared, “it is too early to draw conclusions on the quality of education provided by free schools or their broader system impact.”¹⁰

⁹ Gove, The Rt. Hon. Michael. “Free schools will enable excellent teachers to create new schools and improve standards for all children”, 18th June 2010, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gove-free-schools-will-enable-excellent-teachers-to-create-new-schools-and-improve-standards-for-all-children>

¹⁰ House of Commons Education Committee. *Academies and free schools: Fourth Report of the Session 2014-15*. 21st January 2015.

III. *A Rising Tide*

However, just six weeks after the Education Committee made this declaration, PX published their conclusions about just that. The headline findings - which found their way straight into the headlines on the 9th March 2015 - of *A Rising Tide* spoke specifically of the “competitive benefits” of the free schools model. It was argued that the rising tide of competition is driving up standards in non-free schools, and as such, their recommendations held that everything should be done to encourage their expansion: free schools should be authorised in areas of educational need (where standards are low), and not just of basic need (where school places are needed); expansion grants should be provided to encourage existing providers to open more schools; and companies providing support for groups who want to establish free schools (specifically one called the New Schools Network) should be expanded.

These findings are based on the report’s analysis which looked at schools which were geographically close-to, and demographically “similar” to, all of the free schools opened since 2010. They then looked at the “headline results measures” of these schools (national exams taken at ages 11 and 16), and compared them both before and after the free school had opened close to them. From this came the conclusion (presented in bold font in the report’s “Executive Summary”) that “Free Schools are helping to raise standards not just for the pupils who attend them but for other pupils across the local community - especially those in lower performing schools”.¹¹ While they did attest briefly that correlation does not equal causation, and recognised that in some schools (in particular high performing primaries) they in fact found evidence of a negative correlation, this information was not recognised by the plethora of newspapers and media outlets that reported the findings.

Free schools are a contentious issue, and immediately following the report - while the Conservative Party worked hard to promote the results - an array of criticisms sprung up. Political criticism was to be expected. There was significant pushback from the Labour Party (who have since promised in their

¹¹ Policy Exchange. *A Rising Tide*, p.6

manifesto to eliminate the “flawed” free school policy if they win the election¹²) with the Shadow Education Minister, Tristram Hunt, attacking Cameron’s determination to “carry on regardless” with what he described as a policy that was “expensive, wasteful and failing young people”.¹³ Meanwhile the UK’s largest teacher’s union, the National Union of Teachers (NUT), issued a press release saying that it did not accept the conclusions, directly attacking the data on which they were based.

The academic criticism was just as aggressive. Simon Burgess (Professor of Economics at Bristol University) fact-checked the report and found that differences overall were neutral, and that “improvements” shown by schools closest to free schools are in fact in line with the national average gains in the same period, demonstrating that “there is no evidence [...] of a spill-over from competitive pressure”.¹⁴ Dr Rebecca Allen of University College London critiqued the cursory consideration given to other variables that may have impacted the minimal results (such as increased funding over to deprived schools, and the likelihood of outliers regressing to the mean).¹⁵ Meanwhile, many drew attention to small sample sizes, arguing that a pool of only 171 schools (many of them open only one year) is not valid to make conclusions, particularly on the level of sub-group analysis (16, 19, 35 and 22 primaries and 5, 20, 28 and 26 secondaries opened in 2011-2014, respectively). Dr Stephen Gorard (Durham University) lambasted the analysis within quartiles which saw “on average... less than one neighbouring school being compared to each free school per quartile”.¹⁶

¹² Labour Party. 2015. *Changing Britain Together: 2015 Manifesto*. p.41

¹³ Hunt, Tristram. “Creationism, waste and bad teaching are all things you can expect in David Cameron’s Free Schools”. The Labour Party. 9th March 2015. <http://www.labour.org.uk/blog/entry/creationism-waste-and-bad-teaching>

¹⁴ Burgess, Simon. “Fact Check: are free schools raising education standards?”, The Conversation. 10th March 2015. <http://theconversation.com/fact-check-are-free-schools-raising-education-standards-38547>

¹⁵ Allen, Rebecca and Dave Thomson. “Free schools improve/lower standards at nearby schools [delete as appropriate to suit ideological position]”. Data Lab. 9th March 2015. <http://www.educationdatalab.org.uk/Blog/March-2015/Free-schools-improve-lower-standards-at-nearby-sch.aspx#.VSFZSzvF84R>

¹⁶ Education Media Centre. “‘Free schools fail to serve the neediest’ Evidence challenges benefits of free schools”. 9th March 2015. <http://educationmediacentre.org/newsreactions/free-schools-fail-to-serve-the-neediest-evidence-challenges-benefits-of-free-schools/>

And yet, despite these problems - some of which are recognised (albeit passingly, and not in bold typeface) in the report itself - the launch of *A Rising Tide*, along with Cameron's synchronised announcement, made the headlines across the UK. To understand the power and importance of the PX report, it is vital to understand its origins, and it is to these that this paper shall turn now.

IV. A Legacy of Thinking

Since it began in 2002, PX's reports have covered topics from crime and the economy, to housing and the environment, but they have always shown an active interest in educational policy. The Education Team (generally two people) has produced 45 reports on Education and the Arts in 14 years, offering recommendations on leadership in schools, the length of the school day, and vocational training routes. A substantial part of this literature has been related to a market model for education. The table below shows a very broad summary of the six main publications that cover this topic.¹⁷

Table 1. Summary of Policy Exchange Publications on School Choice

Publication	Year	Authors	Key Argument
Hands Up for School Choice	2004	Tony Hockley and Daniel Nieto	Aimed to bring debate about school choice out of an "ideological rut". Looked at case studies of Sweden, Netherlands and the US, and claimed on this evidence choice is "not just an ideological pipedream but a workable policy that can deliver clear benefits to children and be popular among parents".
Choice? What Choice?: Supply and Demand in English Education	2007	Eleanor Sturdy and Sam Freedman	Claimed school choice was not working in England- parents weren't getting what they wanted, and much of schooling was still inadequate. They said barriers to choice were "not legislative but political" and made recommendations to make the process of converting to academies much easier.
Guide to School Choice Reforms	2009	Sam Freedman and Daisy Meyland-Smith	Compared strengths and weaknesses of choice reforms in UK, US and Sweden and made recommendations for how the UK could create the best schools market (based around making approval process easier and more transparent).

¹⁷ Other reports may make reference to these principles, but this paper prioritises those specifically related to market choice in education.

Publication	Year	Authors	Key Argument
Blocking the Best: Obstacles to new, independent state schools	2010	Anna Fazackerley, Rachel Wolf and Alex Massey	Further criticised the barriers in place that were preventing the establishment of “genuinely independent state schools”. These included barriers to establishment, and barriers to autonomy.
Competition Meets Collaboration: Helping school chains address England’s long tail of educational failure	2012	James O’Shaughnessy	Assessed the success of academies and academy chains along with what it called “a large swathe of ‘coasting schools’”, and made recommendations, firstly for an “industrial policy” which would force failing schools under chain control, and secondly for private sector involvement in school improvement.
Social Enterprise Schools: A potential profit-sharing model for the state-funded school system	2012	Andrew Laird and Justin Wilson	Made the argument for for-profit provision of school services, upholding that “extensive” privatisation in other countries “appears to be working”. Designed model of “social enterprise schools” as a “halfway house” between for-profit and non-profit.

Although authored by different people (reflecting the changing staff of PX’s Education Team), these publications demonstrate a largely unified ideology which underpins a developing train of thought. The initial reports were concerned firstly with identifying problems with the existing choice model, and secondly with normalising the idea of educational marketisation through international comparisons. Having established this, PX’s recommendations were focussed on how the process of setting up “independent” schools (academies) could be made easier and more transparent, based on their conclusions that choice in the US and Sweden was working. Since 2010 policy recommendations have demonstrated an increased focus on privatisation mechanisms, reports arguing that successful educational providers should be encouraged to expand. Perhaps most controversially, in 2012 two reports promoted the opening up of education to for-profit providers. This argument has disappeared from the most recent publications, arguably because these ideas are still too controversial in the current political climate.

As such, in advocating for the competitive benefits of free schools, PX’s 2015 report continues a long trend of a pro-market approach to education. No other think tank has prioritised these reforms to the extent of PX. They have run alongside developing school choice in English education, and played an

active role in shaping how this looks, particularly since 2010 under the Conservative government. A 2013 interview with Sam Freedman (previous Director of Education of PX) demonstrated that PX are only too aware of the power they have in the Tory government: “the ideas behind structural reform, like free schools, had been around for some time and worked on in Policy Exchange”. Freedman claimed a strong causal relationship between politicians and think tanks, whereby ideas were created and honed in the former, and picked up by the latter: “Policy development is much easier to do in a think tank... Parliamentarians and their staff don't have much capacity. There is too much day-to-day nonsense going on”.¹⁸

In theory, this idea makes sense, and is arguably not problematic. Governments perceive problems in society that need to be tackled. They look beyond their immediate partisan ideas to find good solutions, in this case, from “independent”, research-rigorous think tanks who can play a key role in the spread of initiative. As leading political academic, Diane Stone argues, think tanks have the potential to “move ideas into politics”, working to “propel them [ideas] within the hearing range of decision-makers”.¹⁹

However, this relationship is made much more complicated when we look closer at these think tanks, and unpick the people and interests behind them.

V. Behind the Thinking

We must now turn to consider from where these ideas come; without this it is difficult to conceptualise how we can fully understand the role of PX in creating policy. Here we shall consider the founders, staff, and collaborators at PX, then the think tank’s trustees, and finally its funders.

¹⁸ Quoted by Fiona Millar. “Who is really behind Michael Gove's big education ideas?”, *The Guardian*, 3rd December 2013

¹⁹ Stone, Diane. 1996. *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process* (London; Portland: Frank Cass), p.1

i. Founders:

PX was established in 2002 by three dominant and important members of the Conservative Party.²⁰

- Nicholas Boles - Director of PX until 2007. Since then he has been Chief of Staff to Conservative Mayor Boris Johnson, and Parliamentary Private Secretary to the School's Minister. Currently he is Conservative MP for Grantham and Stamford, and Minister of State for Skills and Equality.
- Francis Maude - long-standing member of the Conservative Party who, before they entered office, was a dominant member of the Shadow Cabinet as well as Chairman of the Party. Since 2010 he has been Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General.
- Michael Gove - First Chairman of PX. Entered Parliament in 2005 as MP for Surrey Heath. Was Shadow Minister for Children, Schools and Families, and then enjoyed a prolific and controversial four-years as Secretary of State for Education. He is now Government Chief Whip.

ii. Staff:

The current education team (and authors of *A Rising Tide*) are Jonathon Simons and Natasha Porter. Simons had a career in the Civil Service and worked in the private sector for FTSE 100 company, Serco, while Porter was a teacher for several years before starting King Solomon Academy in London as part of the ARK academy chain. Previous members of the education team include:

- James O'Shaughnessy: Was PX Deputy Director 2004-2007. As Visiting Fellow he authored the 2012 report *Competition meets Collaboration* advocating both for-profit school management, and increased powers for academy chains to take over failing schools. Is active member of Conservative Party, serving 3 years as Director of Policy and Research (2007-2010), and 18 months as Director of Policy to the Prime Minister.
- Daisy Meyland-Smith: Was a Research Fellow at PX 2008-2009. Professional Director of Conservative Party 2011-2013, and previous Conservative Party candidate.

²⁰ These positions were correct at time of writing, however with the General Election taking place on Thursday 9th May 2015, these are subject to change.

- Sam Freedman: Was Head of Education Unit at PX 2006-2009, and previously Head of Research at the Independent Schools Council. Left to become policy advisor to Conservative Secretary for Education, Michael Gove 2009-2013.

iii. Collaborators:

Many of PX's publications are written in partnership with outside consultants, and edited by PX staff members. Some of these consultants have notable connections:

- Rachel Wolf - Was previous policy advisor to Michael Gove, and founder of the New Schools Network (NSW) in 2007. Wolf was a co-author of the 2010 publication *Blocking the Best* which advocated for reduced restrictions on setting up free schools. Her company is the leading provider of support for people wanting to set up free schools; it was the only company named in *A Rising Tide*, with the recommendation that it should evolve its role and "become more responsible for sustained capacity building".²¹ NSN has previously received criticism for refusing to reveal its funders, and for being awarded £500,000 in public money by the Department of Education while Michael Gove was in charge.²²
- Andrew Laird - Public policy specialist who is Director of Mutual Ventures, a company that supports social enterprise groups who deliver public services. He was lead author of the 2012 publication *Social Enterprise Schools* that, recognising the political difficulties with for-profit education in the UK, designed a model that would be more palatable to the British public.

iv. Trustees:

PX currently has a board of 15 trustees. The majority of these own businesses (including consulting companies, banks, and hedge funds), however they also include a couple of journalists, and the co-founder of an arts charity. The Chairman of the Board, David Frum, is a Canadian-American political

²¹ Policy Exchange. *A Rising Tide*, p.49

²² Clark, Tom. "New Schools Network lacks transparency". *The Guardian*. 6th July, 2010.

commentator who was previously a speechwriter for George W. Bush. Several have links with the Conservative Party:

- Lord Simon Wolfson - Chief Executive of clothing company Next, and a Tory peer.
- George Robinson - Co-founder of hedge fund company, Sloane Robinson. According to Electoral Commission records, between 2004-2012, he gave a total of £417,600 to the Conservative Party.²³
- Simon Brocklebank-Fowler - Executive Chairman of Cubitt Consulting who donated to the Conservative election campaign.

Previous PX trustees includes Tory peers and MPs (Baroness Patience Wheatcroft, Edward Heathcoat Amory, and David Mellor), staff (Rachel Whetstone and Danny Finkelstein), and donors (Theodore Agnew and Andrew Sells).²⁴

v. *Funding*:

As a registered charity, Policy Exchange (as with 7 other UK think tanks including Civitas, Demos, the IPPR, the Institute of Economic Affairs, the New Economics Foundation, Reform, and the Social Market Foundation) receives many tax benefits. It is required to release its income (which, until this year, was the highest of this group, with a little over £3.2 million²⁵), but is not under any obligation to provide information on its donors. Individual reports have not included details of funders since 2004, the majority of the publications, including *A Rising Tide*, merely offering vague acknowledgements to people and corporations.

²³ The Electoral Commission. <http://search.electoralcommission.org.uk/English/Search/Donations?currentPage=2&rows=10&query=george%20robinson&sort=AcceptedDate&order=desc&tab=1&et=pp&et=ppm&et=tp&et=perpar&et=rd&prePoll=false&postPoll=true> [Accessed 2nd May, 2015]

²⁴ Social Investigations. "Policy Exchange links to the Conservative Party". 1st November, 2012. <http://socialinvestigations.blogspot.com/2012/11/policy-exchange-trustees-links-to.html>

²⁵ Jones, Gareth. "Policy Exchange leads think tank income falls". Charity Financials. 4th March 2015. <http://www.charityfinancials.com/caritas-magazine/policy-exchange-leads-think-tank-income-falls-1560.html>

This is a largely unscrutinised area. In 2011, the *Guardian* journalist George Monbiot began an investigation to demand greater transparency from “free market think tanks”, which he described as a “threat to democracy”. He got in touch with 15 think tanks in the UK and asked them to reveal their funders, providing a score out of five for transparency and accountability. PX was one of the 9 groups contacted who refused to provide any information at all, causing Monbiot to give it a score of zero. The leftist journalist wrote in his blog, “the harder you stare at them, the more [think tanks] look like lobby groups working for big business without disclosing their interests”.²⁶ A prototype project “Who Funds You” has tried a similar programme, awarding PX a ‘D’ on its scale (A-E) of transparency, only avoiding the lowest category by merit of declaring its total annual income. According to the project’s website, PX told them, “In line with Charity Commission rules we respect our supporters’ right to privacy and do not disclose their details unless they wish to be publicly acknowledged. Many supporters are thanked in our reports which are all free to download from our website.”²⁷

When we look closer at PX, we see a tangled web of connections underpinning their “thinking”. Vested interests become confused, as key players shift between think tank, politics, and business. Meanwhile, millions of pounds are pumped anonymously into the research. Increasingly it becomes harder to see them as the “completely independent” body that they claim to be on their website.

VI. Free Thinking?

This tangled web cannot help but taint the way we view this organisation and others like it. The role of think tanks - which barely existed 30 years ago - has grown exponentially. Now they are an important feature of society, both in way that they are directly used to shape policy, and in the way that they influence what Andrew Denham and Mark Garnett have called “the climate of opinion”.²⁸

²⁶ Monbiot, George. “Think of a Tank”. 12th September 2011. <http://www.monbiot.com/2011/09/12/think-of-a-tank/>

²⁷ Who Funds You? <http://whofundyou.org/org/policy-exchange> [Accessed 2nd May, 2015].

²⁸ Denham & Garnett. 1998. *British think-tanks*.

There are three main groups whose ideas may be influenced by think tanks such as PX:

- Politicians: Political academics have argued that British politics “is more open to outside advice than ever before”.²⁹ In a recent Ipsos Mori Survey of British MPs, think tanks (or “evidence from experts, e.g. think tanks”) were their most highly prioritised source of information and advice, with 50% of survey participants believing that they should pay attention to these sources above all others when deciding “what should be done”.³⁰ The influence of PX (which was once described by *The New Statesman* as “Cameron’s favourite think tank”³¹) on Tory policy is particularly prolific. Beyond the *Rising Tide* report, in April 2015 PX proudly announced the 13 policies that it had suggested which had been included in the Conservative Party 2015 Manifesto.³²
- Media: On an almost daily basis, newspaper will produce stories directed by the publications of various “influential think tanks”.³³ These are often included without any reference to partisan leanings, let alone specific reference to authors or funders.
- General Public: Propagated by the media, the general public cannot help but be exposed to these ideas; in many ways, they are even targeted by them. Stone has explored the ways in which think tanks offer “condensed arguments”, palatable to the general public and imbued with rhetoric and metaphor, intended to “enhance the political potency of ideas and mobilise support”.³⁴

²⁹ Sherrington, Philippa. 2000. “British think tanks: advancing the intellectual debate?”. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 2(2): 256-263

³⁰ Ipsos Mori MPs Survey, MPs interviewed from 4th November to 10th December 2014.

³¹ *The New Statesman*. “Policy Exchange”. 29th May, 2009. <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2009/04/tank-policy-report-director>

³² Policy Exchange. 14th April 2015. <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/media-centre/in-the-news/category/item/policy-exchange-in-the-conservative-2015-manifesto>

³³ See, for a small example: Pickard, Jim. “Brexit could cost economy £56bn a year, think-tank warns”. *Financial Times*. 23rd March, 2015; *ITV News*. “Labour spending plans 'a big unknown', think-tank says”. 13th April, 2015.

³⁴ Stone. 1996. *Capturing the Political Imagination*. p.136

However, this paper argues that this is dangerous when we consider that the origins of this information and advice, and the motivations of those producing it, are, at best neither discussed nor made clear to non-specialists, and at worst, purposefully hidden from them.

Issue One: Who is Paying for the Thinking?

The funding issue is paramount here. A recent report by Transparify, a non-profit initiative in Georgia identified the UK as less transparent on think tank funding than any other European country, contending that its proportion of “highly opaque” think tanks dramatically reduced the European average transparency rating. As such, they called for the UK to start a “national debate” about the value of financial transparency in policy research.³⁵

Without information about PX’s donors, we can only speculate about the impact of funds on the “thinking” that it is producing. While there is every chance that their funding is sourced from impartial, non-lobbyist groups, without the details (which they are so reluctant to reveal³⁶), there is no proof. If, however, some - or all - of the money is being provided by corporations with vested interests in the topics of their research, then PX might be guilty of astro-turfing, whereby corporate funding is hidden under the guise of being from independent grassroots sources. This caused controversy in 2013 when two of the UK’s biggest free-market think tanks (Adam Smith Institute and the Institute of Economic Affairs) - who had both criticised government plans to introduce plain packaging for cigarettes - were discovered as having received tens of thousands of pounds from big tobacco companies.³⁷

³⁵ Transparify. 2015. “How Transparent are Think Tanks about Who Funds Them: 2015?”, p.10

³⁶ Monbiot, George. “Think of a Tank”. 12th September 2011. <http://www.monbiot.com/2011/09/12/think-of-a-tank/>

³⁷ Doward, Jamie. “Health groups dismayed by news 'big tobacco' funded rightwing thinktanks”. 1st June 2013.

This kind of behaviour has been somewhat prolific in the US, where, since the 1970s, large corporations have poured money into organisations such as the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute to mass-produce “research” which favoured their interests.³⁸ Beyond this, academic scrutiny has fallen on the power of think tanks - funded by conservative corporations and foundations - to spread doubt about climate change and lead the environmental scepticism movement in America.³⁹ And yet still, in spite of the fact that Transparify noted that, as of 2015, half of US think tanks are now considered “transparent” about their funding (if not without vested interests), publication after publication is turned out, prompting countless uncritical news stories relaying their findings, under the guise of the think tank as an impartial and highly trustworthy source of information.

In the US it would appear that this cannot be guaranteed, and - without clear evidence about funding sources in the UK - we cannot be sure that the problem is not just as acute across the Atlantic.

Issue Two: Who is Doing the Thinking?

Putting to one side the matter of fiscal opacity, there is another, more complex issue in the openness of think tank culture in the UK, related to what Stone calls the “epistemic communities” that underpin British and American policy-making.⁴⁰ Epistemic communities are groups of people from a variety of disciplines who share common ideological principles and similar world views. Within these groups in policy-making are politicians, civil servants, academics, newspapers, and - of course - think tanks.

When we look at PX we see not only an epistemic community made up of Conservative politicians, civil servants, corporate businesspeople, and think tank fellows and employees, but one in which the different roles are not set in stone; instead, key players either straddle multiple domains, or shift

³⁸ Smith, Hendrick. 2011. *Who Stole the American Dream?* (New York: Random House), p.11

³⁹ Jacques, Peter J, Riley E. Dunlap & Mark Freeman. 2008. “The organisation of denial: Conservative think tanks and environmental scepticism”. *Environmental Politics* 17(3):349-385

⁴⁰ Stone. 1996. *Capturing the Political Imagination*. p.86

between them. In many ways this is to be expected; people are of course attracted to organisations that share their ideals and political leanings. However, in this situation there are two significant risks.

Firstly, there is the danger that an epistemic community might lead to the creation of an inward-looking institution whose close-mindedness self-confirms and fuels their own “innovations”, as a lack of non-partisan objectivity limits the production of critical research. Secondly, and possibly worse than this, it also risks the influence of vested interests influencing research - even without the direct influence of money. To this degree, it was noted by one education commentator as unusual that the *Rising Tide* report, despite advocating the competitive benefits of the market, specifically called on only *one* social enterprise that should be expanded to help groups.⁴¹ That enterprise was the New Schools Network, founded by Rachel Wolf (who authored previous reports for PX, see above), and home of several employees who had previously worked for PX (Natalie Evans, Fred Burgess), not to mention Diana Berry, NSN Director of Development, and Trustee of PX.⁴²

VII. Conclusion

The influence of PX in both directing and legitimising the Conservative policy of educational choice through free schools is strong, although without further information about the relationship between these two policy players, it is difficult to speculate as to its exact nature.

Nonetheless, with the *Rising Tide* report, PX extend their 13 year record of producing high-profile “empirical” publications advertising the potential and benefits of free schools, even as the Department of Education demands that it is too early for such results, and elsewhere in the world, similar models

⁴¹ McInerney, Laura. “6 super-nerdy things you might have missed in the Policy Exchange free school report”. *Schools Week*. 9th March 2015.

⁴² All employment specifics correct at the time of writing, information comes from the PX and NSN websites.

garner increasing scrutiny and criticism.⁴³ Meanwhile, although the quality of their research does receive some analysis and critique (granted mainly just in the margins of the educational cybersphere), the origins do not. Instead, PX remains underneath the radar, as one of a group of think tanks whose lack of funding transparency and intellectual openness cannot help but compromise the “complet[e] independen[ce]” that they claim to have.

If it, and other think tanks like it, are to continue to influence both policy and the “climate of opinion” in British society, we must demand a reevaluation of how their finances managed, their vested interests are regulated (or at least made transparent), and their findings are reported.

⁴³ OECD. 2015. “Improving Schools in Sweden: An OECD Perspective”