

AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL EXCHANGE COUNCIL

INDIVIDUAL STUDY TOUR TO THE UNITED KINGDOM

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Executive Summary

This report will provide a summary of aspects of the author's recent study trip to the United Kingdom. The purpose of the study tour was to gain an understanding of the layered progressive political community by interviewing representatives from think tanks, pressure groups, labour media organisations, elected representatives and prominent academic figures, as well as the Party organisation. The broad objective was to map the ideas generation process within Labour. It was with respect to the following issues of personal interest that the interviews were conducted:

- The funding, operational and strategic models underpinning progressive think-tanks, including governance and legislative comparisons.
- Decision making models and processes of ideas development.
- How organisations contribute to a progressive ideas culture, with particular emphasis on the UK Labour Conference Fringe Program.
- The gendered perspective of the lived political class experience.
- General comparisons between Australian and UK experiences of party politics, civic engagement and landmark policy.
- Scottish Devolution and the final weeks of the Scottish independence campaign.

In undertaking this research, I travelled to London, York and Manchester to convene one on one and group meetings, and to attend events. A typical one on one meeting lasted approximately sixty minutes. Extensive notes were taken throughout and after these meetings, which form the foundation of this report.

This report is largely an account of personal and informal conversations, and the author would like to highlight the "off-the-record" nature of these conversations and that this report acknowledges those sensitivities.

REPORT

1. A progressive ideas culture

1.1. Understanding think tanks

Defining a think tank is a divisive task; the definitional debate continues and varies in most countries. It is not a debate that will be concluded anytime soon, so it's important that I outline my thinking on the matter, as it underpins how I approached the project.

In essence, think tanks are ideas factories and exist on the premise that ideas can create change. However the organisational functions and objectives of think tanks are hugely varied. It is generally accepted that all types of think tanks seek to inform the public policy process through arms-length research and analysis. What constitutes as *inform*, *arms length* and *research and analysis* is up to interpretation by any individual organisation. Most think tanks nail their colours to the mast by either identifying with a thought leader (for example a Prime Minister or Premier), with an ideology (progressive, conservative or liberal is common) or with a world-view (such as free market economics or big government). It is in this sense that most think tanks sit on the political spectrum, with cultural political links, formal political links, or both, despite their political party engagement strategy. This is true of both Australian and British think tanks.

Most think tanks in the UK operate under the charities legislation, requiring a degree of separation to the parties. This legislation also requires a full disclosure of financial papers, giving transparency to funding sources, annual turnover and a general overview to expenses. This transparency also meant that think tanks were not guarded when discussing their finances.

I chose to focus my research on small to medium sized organisations that identified as progressive. The largest organisation I interviewed was the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), turning over around £3 million (AU\$5.5 million) annually. IPPR is the largest progressive think tank in the UK, however is remarkably small when compared with American progressive think tank giant the Centre for American Progress (CAP), which according to Source Watch¹ turns over US\$25 million (AU\$28 million) annually. I also focused on organisations with strong links to the Labour party, and generally avoided organisations with a single-issue policy focus, with the exception of the Electoral Reform Society.

1.2. Understanding other non-party organisations

This research also deals with other non-party organisations, such as progressive pressure groups, media organisations and community campaign organisations. Generalist pressure groups typically operate within a single party and are similar to think tanks in their "ideas culture" ethos. Their main differentiating factor to think tanks is their strategy of influencing the Party through internal campaigning and organising, usually without generating research themselves. Labour pressure group Progress is the best example of this type of organisation.

Also existing within this political universe are progressive media organisations. These organisations report news and commentary from a progressive perspective, for a progressive audience. The two leading organisations of this category are Left Foot Forward and Labour List, which both have large online audiences.

¹ http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Center_for_American_Progress

Finally campaign organisations such as Movement for Change, take leadership for civic activism and localised community movement building. They operate in the Labour space by campaigning on progressive issues and using labour networks to their advantage, but also align to the methods of social democracy such as collective power.

For the purposes of this report, think tanks, pressure groups, media and campaign organisations will be referred to on group as “non-party organisations”.

1.3. Operational models and funding sources of non-party organisations

While non-party organisations draw their funds from a diverse range of sources, almost all have an existing legacy or a funding partner, either in the form of ongoing financial support or of capital, which underpin their operating model. A number of organisations rely on “seed funding” from large corporates, philanthropists or charitable trusts, commonly from Lord Sainsbury or the Joseph Roundtree Foundation. Some organisations, in the case of the Fabian Society or the Electoral Reform Society, have existed for such a long period of time (some close to 100 years), surviving many political cycles, world wars, and economic crisis’ that they’ve been able to capitalise on a variety of economic opportunities, many in the form of building ownership.

Additionally, organisations seek funding for specific research programs, usually in the form of publication partnerships. In the UK, there is a strong culture of corporate and philanthropist donations for policy or research relevant to their organisational or corporate social responsibility objectives. Many of these progressive non-party organisations abide by an ethical funding statement, prohibiting donations from Tobacco companies and other organisations they deem necessary to blacklist.

Some organisations also accept small, regular contributions from supporters, in the form of “regular donors” or a membership structure. The Fabian Society is one example of this, where members pay £42 per annum, receiving a quarterly magazine and at least one hard copy pamphlet per year. In this particular case, membership income forms one third of the total Fabian Society annual turnover.

The largest funding component for most non-party organisations is through sponsored events, culminating in the Fringe, which I will discuss in the next section of this report. Separate to Fringe, many non-party organisations run regular low-cost events, free to the attendee, but paid in sponsorship up to around £7000 per event (except for IPPR, which have brand recognition and therefore charge significantly more for their events program). The best example of this program would be the Social Market Foundation (SMF) “Chalk + Talk” series. This program consists of a monthly event from 12.30pm-1.30pm in their office, located in Westminster. A guest speaker, often a recently published author or researcher, presents a short lecture followed by questions. The format is roundtable, with anywhere between twenty and forty people expected to attend, with a basic lunch provided.

Crucial to the success of this model is the central location in Westminster – the heart of the British political class. Westminster is where the majority of parliamentary, party organisational and non-party organisations are located. But for interested organisations and individuals located outside of Westminster, London’s world-class public transport system makes these events highly accessible during working hours. Additionally, close proximity of neighbouring university cities like Cambridge, Oxford, and even York and Manchester (only two hours by train) make central events accessible to a broad and diverse political class living outside of the city.

1.4. 2014 UK Labour Conference Fringe

The Fringe is a festival of ideas that runs in tandem to the annual Labour Party conference. The festival is made up of hundreds of events run by non-party organisations, and is a vibrant and colourful display of Labour values and debate.

The festival itself is crucial to the Party and its culture of ideas – it's where policy is debated and lobbied, and where Labour members and supporters are active in display of their ideas and enthusiasm.

The Fringe also provides the party with a significant fundraising opportunity, and in turn, provides a platform for non-party organisations to raise a significant portion of its annual funds.

The format of events is varied, but mainly consists of panel sessions (between three to six panellists discussing a single topic), receptions (drinks with speeches), rallies (larger events addressed by MPs and activists), as well as arts and culture events, showcases and training. Many of the host organisations also run similar events at the other party conferences.

1.5. A writing culture

Critical to the progressive political culture in the UK is the prominence of a writing culture. Almost all non-party organisations have an online presence, publishing think pieces, opinion, commentary and news on a regular basis. Additionally, many organisations publish long-form articles in the form of pamphlets (non periodical book under forty-eight pages in length), magazines and research papers. There are also a number of serious political journals such as New Statesman and Prospect magazine, as well as traditional news outlets - The Independent, The Guardian and The Evening Standard who regularly publish Labour thinkers. Much of this work is unpaid to the author, but on the surface payment is less important than the platform and readership offered by publication. From my observations and discussions, it is clear that the writing culture is a critically important activity to the political class at all levels, and is crucial for both garnering support for your idea and solidifying your "on the record" position.

1.6. Civic activism

Within the ranks of the younger and newer Members of Parliament is a desire to create a richer civil society, and in turn, better informed political discourse. In discussing these issues with Stella Creasy MP, she said "social democracy means people need to be engaged in decision making, for MP's not to turn up and say, "This is how I'll fix your problem"". This transition from a civic servicing to civic organising is an ongoing shift and a significant challenge for social democratic parties around the world.

2. Policy issues, political challenges and interesting ideas

The following policy areas, political challenges and interesting ideas were discussed with a number of individuals, and observed by the researcher via mainstream media, at events, and other sources. The issues are noted here in summary form, as both existing and emerging areas of interest for progressive politics. The purpose for their inclusion in this report is to give a simple overview of topical debates for both UK Labour and the British population at large.

2.1. Public service reform

For the conservative coalition government, public service reform is the positive way of discussing austerity related cuts and restructures to the public sector. For Labour, public service reform refers to the increasing need to better deliver public services that meet modern community demand and expectations, and the reconfigurations and alliances needed to the transformation possible by consensus. This is a long-term policy challenge for Labour, particularly under the current harsh economic climate in the UK.

2.2. Immigration

The British debate on immigration was heated and unrelenting throughout my time spent in the UK. Migration figures in Britain continue to grow, with net migration up more than thirty-eight per cent in 2013-2014². In the ten years since 1993, the UK migrant population doubled to over 7.8 million, thirty-six per cent of which live in London³. This growing migrant population when combined with issues such as wages and labour market demand, standard of living, austerity and public service squeeze, creates a debate on sustainable population levels. This debate is further pushed by the rise of the United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP), a populist, nationalist party.

2.3. Europe

Related to the debates on migration, a rising level of Euro-scepticism has plagued UK politics for some time. Ferociously anti-EU, UKIP won twenty-seven per cent of the popular vote in the 2014 UK European Union elections, now holding twenty-four MEPs (Members of European Parliament). Labour has twenty MEPs and the Conservatives only nineteen. This issue continues to bubble away in all party rooms.

2.4. Payday lending

Payday loans are an exploding industry in the UK, and until recently, were largely unregulated. These austerity profiteering loan sharks target the eighteen to twenty-four year old market with loans at interest rates of up to 4,000 per cent. This is one way that UK consumers have become among the most indebted in the world, with Stella Creasy MP writing in *The Guardian* "the consequences of rolling over a payday loan... can start with a £100 loan and end up owing £17,000"⁴.

² <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-28964323>

³ <http://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/migrants-uk-overview>

⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/may/29/payday-loan-companies-britain-regulators>

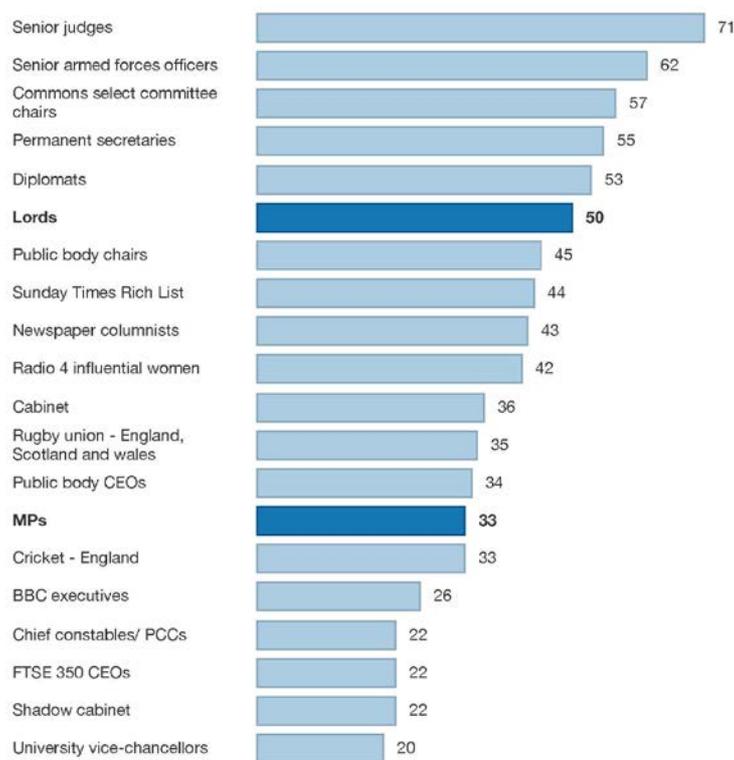
2.5. Child Trust Funds

An idea championed by LSE professor Julian LeGrand, Labour thinker and then advisor to Tony Blair, Child Trust Funds operated on the premise that all young people should set out on their adult lives with an endowment of capital. This idea became part of the 2001 Labour election manifesto and was made policy in 2005. In operation, each baby born received an account with £250 deposited, with additional payments made by government later in the child's life. The accounts were not means tested – an example of an egalitarian policy with universal implementation. The fund was abolished by the Conservatives in 2010.

2.6. Elitism and class

Class structures continue to dominate British public life. British public schools are elite fee-paying schools historical in establishment, typically boys' boarding schools. These schools make up just one per cent of the total schools in the UK and account for the education of seven per cent of Britons. However, in parliament, thirty-four per cent of all MP's were educated at these schools – fifty-four per cent for the conservatives and twelve per cent for Labour⁵. The cost of attending one of these elite schools costs up to an average £13,800 a year for day places, and £26,000 for boarders⁶. To put simply, the boarding school cost of these school is around the same amount as a British annual median wage⁷. This interesting research published by The Guardian⁸ shows the following breakdown of public school dominance, including 50 per cent of the House of Lords. Whilst an issue in many areas of public life (as demonstrated below), this statistical evidence of elitism is used in particular to argue for democratisation of the House of Lords.

Figure 1: *Positions by percentage of private (public school) education*



2.7.

⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/nov/11/john-major-public-school-tory-elite>

⁶ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/9228953/Private-education-what-price-excellence.html>

⁷ <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2013/dec/12/uk-median-weekly-pay-is-517-but-who-earns-that>

⁸ <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2014/aug/28/elitism-in-britain-breakdown-by-profession>

Scottish independence and devolution, and English devolution

The Scottish independence referendum was held on 18 September 2014, midway through this research trip. In observing the final two-weeks of the campaign, the polls tightened and both party and non-party organisations increased their involvement, diverting resources from other programs. For Labour, this was a difficult campaign. In the House of Commons, Labour holds forty-one out of the fifty-nine Scottish seats. Scotland is a labour stronghold, yet a large portion of labour voters voted yes to independence, against the party position. In the final weeks, the Independence narrative was consumed by questions around the pound, interest rates and UK company headquarters. The final result was in favour of the UK, with over fifty-five per cent voting against Independence. Since the close of the polls, the focus has shifted to continued devolution from Westminster and increased regional powers. This debate has seen another surge in anti-EU sentiment and nationalism, with the discussion on systems of devolution and regionalisation only just beginning. This issue is shaping up to be a major component of the 2015 election campaign.

2.8. Inequality

Interest in inequality as a policy challenge has risen since Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson published *The Spirit Level* in 2009, and Thomas Piketty published *Capital* in 2014. Whilst it is a challenge for all political parties, cause and effect of inequality, and consequential alleviation, is a core principal for Labour. I discussed inequality with a variety of interview participants, including *Spirit Level* authors Pickett and Wilkinson, but there is one extremely interesting framing argument. Stella Creasy MP discussed that tackling inequality needs to be framed and politicked as “lost potential”. The essence of her opinion was that making sure poor communities have access to education isn’t to ensure they “don’t become criminals” but to ensure avoiding “lost potential”. It seems that there is a growing mood in Labour to change the way “the poor” are looked after and a changing perspective on values of social justice. This shift could see fundamental changes to the way many policy challenges are addressed.

3. The gendered political class experience

In meeting with women and men in the UK political class, I was interested to find out if equal representation in the Parliament was gaining momentum and support. What follows is a brief account of the main discussion points on this subject.

3.1. Facts and figures

As reported by the Sex and Power report, a research report compiled by a coalition of the Centre for Women and Democracy, the Electoral Reform Society, the Fawcett Society, the Hansard Society and Unlock Democracy, the outlook for women in politics is dismal. Their research shows that the current rate of women's progress into positions of power is happening so slow, that a child born today will be drawing a pension before equal representation in parliament is reached⁹.

The most powerful and often quoted fact from my research in the UK is this: that the total number of women ever elected as Members of Parliament is less than the current number of male Members of Parliament. Put another way, if every woman Member of Parliament that has existed since women were eligible to run in 1918 were in Parliament today, they would still be the minority¹⁰.

These two often quoted facts display at its most simple level the severe inequality in Britons political class.

3.2. All women shortlists

Unlike Australian Labor, where Affirmative Action policies are in place, British Labour has a policy of All Women Shortlists (AWS). The current position of British Labour is that candidates in fifty per cent of all Labour winnable seats, including seats with retiring Labour members, should be women. In practice, this means that when the National Executive Committee, the governing committee of British Labour, select the target seats for an upcoming election, fifty per cent of those seats will be nominated as AWS. Put simply, an AWS seat means that only women can run for pre-selection, guaranteeing a woman candidate in the seat.

AWS has been remarkably more successful in seeing women elected to parliament than the previous policy that required that all electorates have at least one woman as part of the pre-selection process (or to use UK terminology, on the shortlist). In the 1987 and 1992 elections with the previous policy in place, twenty-one and thirty-six Labour women were elected, respectively. This was from a total of 229 (nine per cent) and 271 (thirteen per cent) Labour MPs elected. In 1997, after a coordinated internal campaign in support of AWS, the policy was implemented. The 1997 election saw 101 Labour women elected from 418 (twenty-four per cent)¹¹.

Currently, there are eighty-one women Labour MPs in Parliament, equalling thirty-one per cent of the Parliamentary Labour Party. The total number of women in parliament across all parties is twenty-two per cent. While the above statistics show that all women shortlists work, there is still significant work to be done to reach full equality.

⁹ <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Sex-and-Power-2014.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN05057.pdf>

¹¹ http://www.lwn.org.uk/all_women_shortlists

3.3. Championing women

Items 3.1, 3.2 and 2.6 demonstrate statistical evidence of gender inequality and class elitism, resulting in narrow representation in public life. It is clear that these systems are in desperate need of institutional change. But the other type of change that I was interested in investigating was cultural change. How do you get the best women to enter public life, either as candidates, or as thought leaders, when sexism is institutionalised?

Stella Creasy MP, the 313th woman elected as a Member of Parliament argues that sexist overlooking of women's ability is only half the story. She argues that the other half of the story is confidence and support¹². To overcome this challenge, Creasy has founded a volunteer led mentoring project called the "Circular Firing Up Squad". I was privileged to take part in one of these sessions, in the local outer London constituency of Harrow East. These sessions create a safe space for women to come together and undertake personal development, often within the context of political or public life. In the spirit of "Lean In", this civic activism program gives women confidence to talk about themselves and their achievements, and to strive for excellence.

¹² <http://www.workingforwalthamstow.org.uk/challenging-sexism-and-cheerleading-others-to-succeed/>

Appendix 1: Schedule of Meetings

Person/s	Position	Organisation	Location	Date
Paul Smith	(in his role as) President	ALP Abroad	London	31/08/14
Paul Smith (meeting included tour of Council Chambers and meeting with various political council staff)	(in his role as) Councillor	Islington Council	London	2/9/14
Stella Creasy MP	Member of Parliament	UK Labour	London	2/9/14
Professor Julian LeGrand	Richard Titmuss Professor of Social Policy, Former senior policy adviser to for Prime Minister Tony Blair	London School of Economics	London	3/9/14
Jess Asato	Candidate for Norwich North	UK Labour	London	3/9/14
Dan Corry	Chief Executive	New Philanthropy Capital	London	4/9/14
Patrick Diamond	Vice Chair and Research Director	Policy Network	London	5/9/14
Phil Ireland	Strategy Advisor	Purpose London	London	5/9/14
Andrew Harrop	General Secretary	Fabian Society	London	8/9/14
Will Straw	Associate Director for Climate Change, Energy and Transport	Institute for Public Policy Research	London	8/9/14
Mark Ferguson	Editor	Labour List	London	9/9/14
Nicholas Pickard	Former Arts Advisor	(Former) Minister for Arts, Simon Crean	London	9/9/14
Alexandra Jones	Chief Executive	Centre for Cities	London	10/9/14
John Spellar MP	Shadow Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs	UK Labour	London	10/9/14
Jon Cruddas MP	Member of Parliament, Labour Party Policy Coordinator	UK Labour	London	10/9/14
Jo Blackman	Head of International Liaison	UK Labour	London	10/9/14
Iain McNicol	General Secretary	UK Labour	London	10/9/14
Matthew McGregor*	Political Director	Blue State Digital	London	10/9/14
Patrick Heneghan	Executive Director, Field Operations	UK Labour	London	10/9/14

Person/s	Position	Organisation	Location	Date
Simon Jackson	Director of Policy	UK Labour	London	10/9/14
Kitty Ussher	Managing Director	Kitty Ussher	London	11/9/14
Sarah Carter	Operations Manager	Creative Industries Federation	London	15/9/14
James Bloodworth	Director	Left Foot Forward	London	16/9/14
Katie Ghose	Chief Executive	Electoral Reform Society	London	16/9/14
Professor Kate Pickett	Professor, Inequalities in Health, Author of the Spirit Level	University of York	York	17/9/14
Professor Richard Wilkinson	Visiting Professor, Author of the Spirit Level	University of York	York	17/9/14
Martin O'Neil	Senior Lecturer	University of York	York	18/9/14
Kathryn Perera	Chief Executive	Movement for Change	Manchester	22/9/14
Ernst Stetter	Secretary General	Foundation for European Progressive Studies	Manchester	22/9/14
Richard Angell	Deputy Director	Progress	London	23/9/14
Ralph Scott	Head of Editorial	Demos	London	25/9/14
Jonathan Birdwell	Head of the Citizenship and Political Participation Programme	Demos	London	25/9/14

Appendix 2: Events attended (including relevant exhibitions and displays)

Event	Organisation	Location	Date
Disobedient Objects (exhibition)	Victoria and Albert Museum	London	30/8/14
Chalk + Talk with Professor Alison Wolf	Social Market Foundation	London	4/9/14
A stronger Scotland in a stronger UK: What is the case for moving forward together? A speech by former Prime Minister Gordon Brown.	Progress	London	5/9/14
Circular firing-up squad	Harrow East Labour	London	6/9/14
Prime Ministers Question Time	House of Commons	London	10/9/14
ALP Abroad event with Andrew Giles	ALP Abroad	London	10/9/14
Movement for change community organising showcase	Movement for Change	Manchester	21/9/14
General Secretary's report – Iain McNicol	UK Labour	Manchester	21/9/14
Rail public ownership – a vote winner for Labour	Labour List	Manchester	21/9/14
Progress rally: Winning a mandate for change	Progress	Manchester	21/9/14
Labour's spending choices: Social justice and fiscal discipline	Policy Network	Manchester	22/9/14
Labour's next majority? Winning from the left after the great crisis	Policy Network, Foundation for European Progressive Studies, and Renewal Magazine	Manchester	22/9/14
Responding to the rise of populism – What agenda for the left?	UK Labour, Foundation for European Progressive Studies	Manchester	23/9/14
Leader of UK Labour Party Speech – Ed Miliband	UK Labour	Manchester	23/9/14
Spin alley: Debating the Leader's speech	Fabian Society	Manchester	23/9/14
Winning with women: Is there still a women's vote?	Progress	Manchester	23/9/14
Peoples History Museum	Peoples History Museum	Manchester	23/9/14