

INTRODUCING SOAS COP: The Need for Advocacy and Direct Lobbying by Universities

Prof Alison Scott-Baumann, Dr Rob Faure Walker, Dr Maryyum Mehmood, Dr Alyaa Ebbiary, Shahanaz Begum and Hasan Pandor (9th April 2020)

Reliance on think tanks and researchers who sit outside of academic systems of governance risks nourishing governments' tendencies to use policy-led evidence instead of creating evidence-based policy. Such "evidence" risks going unchallenged due to the democratic deficit in UK Higher Education that has been created by encroaching government control on freedom of speech and freedom of assembly on university campuses. By supporting SOAS's proud tradition of political engagement and student activism, **SOAS COP offers a new model that addresses this democratic deficit in universities by helping students and academic experts to reach out directly into the corridors of power.**

While think tanks often have noble aims, Mirowski has written extensively on the emergence of think tanks and how they unsettle the findings of academic research. The normalization of "think tank science" inevitably foments doubt about academic findings and consensus. **The tactic of using think tanks to promote doubt emerged to defend the tobacco industry from scientific claims that their product was harmful and has latterly been used to disastrous effect in undermining the scientific consensus that human activity is a significant cause of climate change.**

An emerging tactic to foment doubt is to appeal to public opinion if academic and scientific consensus does not fit government or corporate agendas: *Conservative Home* recently declared that "there is no climate emergency" because two thirds of their members do not agree with the overwhelming scientific consensus that climate change poses a significant threat to life on earth. A similar reliance on public opinion over academic findings can be seen in efforts to justify the growing counter-extremism industry. The Government's own Commission for Countering Extremism prioritises public opinion to call for an expansion of counter-extremism efforts, and largely ignores academic research that proposes this to be counterproductive. Similarly, CREST Associates appeal to public opinion in a report that was commissioned by Counter-Terrorism Policing HQ, "to review and make recommendations on the police delivery of the Prevent programme". Using leading questions that would never have obtained ethical approval nor passed the peer review required of academic research, the CREST report focuses on the public's lack of opposition to the Prevent Strategy to argue for Prevent's continuation. **These arguments make the implicit claim that decades of academic research should be ignored because it is not aligned with public opinion.**

This situation can be recovered by academics lobbying government and civil society directly. Academics and students are willing and able to speak directly to politicians and policymakers and with the internet and social media, there is no need for them to rely on think tanks to do this. Thus, SOAS COP will:

- **Encourage and support academics to present their research for non-specialist audiences**
- **Help academics and students to write one page briefings on their work**
- **Publish briefings on the [SOAS COP website](https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/cop/) and disseminate to all MPs, Lords, policymakers and the media**
- **Connect academics with select committees and APPGs**
- **Help universities to promote direct engagement with policymakers**
- **Encourage policymakers to prioritise academic research in their decision making.**

It is only by increasing the direct advocacy and lobbying by academics that trust will rightfully be focused on real science rather than think tank opinions. We also appeal to those of you who are successful in such advocacy and lobbying to contact us so that the SOAS community can learn more about how to be heard in the corridors of power.

Visit our website for further briefings (<https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/cop/>). If you would like a personal briefing or clarification on any of the issues raised here, please contact Professor Alison Scott-Baumann and her team for further briefings and access to other experts as150@soas.ac.uk