

Building Bridges

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What was The Atlantic Bridge? How did this bogus ‘charity’ operate without question for years? And who were the donors?

During recent times, we have learnt that the former Secretary of State for Defence, Liam Fox, resigned from his position after accusations that he had breached the Ministerial Code by allowing his close friend, (lobbyist and businessman) Adam Werritty, to represent himself as Fox’s adviser and accompany him to official defence meetings (including to Dubai, Israel and Washington¹) despite not being employed in any official capacity. An official report by Gus O’Donnell found that Fox indeed breached these rules by failing to ensure that no conflict of interest arose.² Apologies have been made and Liam Fox has accepted personal responsibility and the conclusions of the Cabinet Secretary’s Report.³

O’Donnell’s Report, however, is seen to be superficial for not addressing the issues and questions that are on everyone’s mind. Namely, what exactly was The Atlantic Bridge? Who were the donors? And did anyone profit from Fox’s decisions as Defence Minister?

What was The Atlantic Bridge? Founded in 1997 by Fox, the ‘Atlantic Bridge Research and Education Scheme’ was a ‘think-tank’, with Margaret Thatcher as Honorary Patron. The organisation proclaimed to espouse the ‘Special Relationship’ between the United States and the United Kingdom – a phrase coined by Winston Churchill in 1945 and used in his 1946 speech, which focused particularly on aiding the United States to guard the

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atomic bomb ‘as a sacred trust for the maintenance of peace’ and the ‘continuance of the intimate relationship between our military advisers, leading to common study of potential dangers [and] the similarity of weapons and manuals of instructions’.⁴ In recent years, this ‘Special Relationship’ has come to exemplify the Thatcher-Reagan partnership that flourished in the 1980s – namely the promotion of neoliberal projects including privatisation, reduced state intervention, advancing the ‘free market’, and a shared hostility towards communism.

The Atlantic Bridge (TAB) gained charity status on 3 February 2003, and sought the ‘*furtherance of public education on both sides of the Atlantic, in areas of common interest, focusing particularly but not exclusively on free trade, economics, health and science*’, with emphasis on public education and research.⁵ Following a complaint in August 2009 to the Charity Commission (the ‘Commission’) by online blogger Stephen Newton⁶ (who took note of TAB’s affiliations, dubbing it the ‘Tory Travel Club’), an investigation ensued, and the Commission published its findings on 26 July 2010. Political purposes can never be charitable, and if TAB were truly a charitable organisation, it would had to have demonstrated that it was not political in nature; that it operated for the public benefit to further charitable purposes; and that it disseminated information gathered from events and lectures available to the public. All evidence pointed contrary to this – with the Commission’s Report looking particularly at an article published in *The Washington Examiner* by the Chief Executive of the US arm of TAB, Amanda Bowman. The article was political in nature, published just before the UK General Election in May 2010; she discussed the benefits to the US of a British Conservative government, stating that ‘*Cameron will be much more amenable to shared US-UK foreign interests than [Gordon] Brown*’.⁷

Furthermore, the information on TAB’s website was scarce, not readily available to the general public, and the messages conveyed in TAB’s lectures by politicians were not considered to be neutral and balanced in manner, as they promoted a particular (right-wing, Atlanticist) point of view.⁸ It was for these reasons that the Commission advised TAB’s activities ‘cease immediately’.

It can safely be said that this was a case of political propaganda, masquerading as education, in order to achieve a privileged charity status. It is hard to understand how this ‘charity’ went unquestioned for so long when its political agenda was so explicit; particularly when organisations meeting the ‘charity criteria’, who campaign for improvement in public policy, are denied charity status on the grounds that such a trust could

jeopardise relations with another country.⁹

The Bridge

The Atlantic Bridge website boasted a *'network of like-minded people in politics, business, academia and journalism who come together to share views and experiences ... in order to promote an agenda that will strengthen the Special Relationship'*, drawing on the *'expertise'* of their membership.¹⁰ From the start, this 'Special Relationship' has clearly been promoted through neo-conservative, right-wing ideology, with a political agenda, run by high-profile politicians and businessmen. All parties involved over the years could have benefited from this 'Special Relationship', as politicians and lobbyists (the 'like-minded people') at the forefront of the organisation have attended numerous ceremonies and meetings in the name of 'championing freedom in a rapidly changing world'.

There are many UK Conservatives who have played a part within TAB, including Cabinet Ministers Michael Gove, Chris Grayling, William Hague and George Osborne, Second Defence Minister Lord Astor, as well as Andrew Dunlop (former Thatcher adviser and lobbyist). Notable US Republican participants included Senator Jon Kyl (the 'great persuader', recognised as one of the most influential people in the world by *Time Magazine* for his persuasive role in the Senate¹¹); Senator Joe Lieberman (a 'powerful proponent for robust Pentagon spending and weapons programs', 'friend of defence contractors' and recipient of \$250,000 in donations from military contractor United Technologies¹²) and John Falk (defence lobbyist and managing director of private security and defence firm Kestral) to name a few. In line with TAB's mission statement, it can be seen that each of these individuals had their own areas of *'expertise'*, and were there to *'promote an agenda that would strengthen the Special Relationship'*.

Not only was TAB politically biased in its membership, the charity also handed out Margaret Thatcher 'Medals of Freedom' at ceremonies in London to notable right-wing figures, including Henry Kissinger and Rudy Giuliani. Kissinger received his award in 2009 for his *'tireless dedication to academia, public service and peace'*. While Giuliani, at his reception, said that he would like to increase the size of the US military.¹³

It was not just award ceremonies that offered a good chance for Tories and lobbyists to meet and greet their American counterparts – events and conferences attracted sponsorship from Lehman Brothers and the Heritage Foundation; speakers from the Center for Security Policy; donations from

US multinational pharmaceutical corporation Pfizer, from hedge fund boss Michael Hintze (represented by Lord Bell, former Thatcher adviser and head of public relations firm, Bell Pottinger), and from a one-time vice chairman of the lobby group Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre (Bicom), Michael Lewis (also a significant donor to the Conservative party).¹⁴

The charity's history is littered with donations from companies who share a '*common interest*' with TAB's members and associates. In 2010, Liam Fox accepted a £50,000 donation from venture capitalist Jon Moulton, whose firm Better Capital now owns an aerospace, military manufacturer, Gardner Aerospace.¹⁵

In 2007, after Werritty was appointed as UK Executive Director of The Atlantic Bridge, donations rose from £3,309 in 2006 to £49,666 in 2007¹⁶; interestingly, it was also in 2007 that TAB formed an alliance with powerful lobbying organisation the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and formed a sister charity, 'Atlantic Bridge Inc'. It was after the formation of this partnership that true intentions became clearer; ALEC's maxim is 'limited government, free markets, federalism'; its funders include Exxon Mobil, Phillip Morris tobacco and the National Rifle Association. ALEC was found to have held conventions in order to mingle with legislators, presenting them with pre-drafted bills on behalf of members – out of 1000 bills, it is reckoned that some 20% became law.¹⁷

The US's Atlantic Bridge Inc. closed down in December 2010, and in the UK The Atlantic Bridge was dissolved on 30 September 2011, just over 12 months since the publication of the Charity Commission's initial findings. It looks likely that its last months were spent tying up loose ends, with associated UK Conservatives seemingly anxious to distance themselves from the organisation. The Commission's report failed to expose the real issues and, after the dissolution, failed to address which charity TAB's remaining assets (£36,000¹⁸) were transferred to. It could just be coincidence that Pargav, an organisation established by Werritty to further Fox's interest in foreign policy whilst guaranteeing 'total anonymity' to its financiers, was formed on 25 June 2010, eight days before the Commission was due to publish its investigation into TAB.¹⁹ Donors to TAB seemed to have an unrelenting interest in keeping within Fox's line-of-sight, and continued to give to newly established Pargav – with Oliver Hylton as sole Director of the organisation (who acts as senior adviser to donor Hintze, notable donor to TAB).

The defence interests are obvious when confronted with the lists of names associated with The Atlantic Bridge. However, it was not only

defence issues that were integral to TAB's point of interest, but also energy and health care. When Fox sat as Shadow Secretary of State for Health, he chaired a conference with TAB in May 2003 to discuss '*Scientific Research and Medical Provision: The Anglo-American Dynamic*', which questioned the sustainability of the UK health care system, and what lessons we could learn from the US.²⁰ Attended by heads from the NHS, the Galen Institute (a US health and public policy lobbying group) and global pharmaceutical giants GlaxoSmithKline and Pfizer – it is all too tempting to interpret the purpose of these meetings and the intentions of those attending.

What we appear to have witnessed are the acts of international businesses seeking to exert influence and power, seemingly making use of Werritty's close connections with Fox, particularly as a number of those associated with The Atlantic Bridge had strong links to defence contractors (what parallels are there to the 'Arms-to-Iraq' affair of the 1980s?)

Attention has been diverted from Liam Fox and The Atlantic Bridge as news of Muammar Gaddafi's capture and subsequent death has swept across the globe. Prior to the 'triumph' of the West and its NATO forces, Fox's resignation speech started by acknowledging his recent challenging tasks in Libya, as he was confronted with '*an unbearable human tragedy*' on one hand, and a '*deep personal disappointment*' on the other (his resignation). Liam Fox: a man who could seemingly recognise a '*human tragedy*', yet believed that '*for too many, peace has come to mean simply the absence of war. We cannot allow that corrosive view to go unchallenged*'.²¹

There is a second inquiry into the former Defence Minister by the Parliamentary Standards Commissioner who has accepted a complaint from John Mann MP about the use of Fox's Commons office to run The Atlantic Bridge.²²

Notes

1 Report by the Cabinet Secretary Sir Gus O'Donnell, 'Allegations against Rt Hon Dr Liam Fox MP', 18 October 2011; Annex A - Letter from Ursula Brennan, Permanent Under-Secretary of State at Ministry of Defence to Sir Gus O'Donnell, 10 October 2011; Annex B - Occasions when Adam Werritty is known to have met with SOFS in main building and overseas travel

2 *Ibid* Para 22

3 Theo Usherwood, 'Liam Fox's Commons statement in full', *The Independent*, 19 October 2011

4 Winston Churchill, 'Sinews of Peace Address', Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri, March 1946 (speech)

- 5 Charity Commission Regulatory Case Report, The Atlantic Bridge Education and Research Scheme, Registered Charity Number 1099513
- 6 See www.stephennewton.com/atlantic-bridge
- 7 Amanda Bowman, 'What Britain's changing of the guard will mean for the US', *The Washington Examiner*, 7 April 2010
- 8 Charity Commission Regulatory Case Report, The Atlantic Bridge Education and Research Scheme, p6-7
- 9 Amnesty International UK, for example, has had to establish a separate Charitable Trust in order to carry out activities deemed charitable under UK legislation See *McGovern v Attorney-General* [1982]; <http://www.amnesty.org.uk/content.asp?CategoryID=10173>
- 10 See Wayback Machine (2008) <http://web.archive.org/web/20080522072502/http://www.theatlanticbridge.com/welcome.php> accessed 21/10/2011
- 11 http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1984685_1984864_1984901,00.htm accessed 21/10/2011
- 12 <http://www.thehill.com/business-a-lobbying/138979-defense-industry-leiberman-will-be-hard-to-replace-> accessed 21/10/2011
- 13 Harry Hamburg, 'Giuliani: I'm one of "best known Americans"', *USA Today*, 19 September 2007
- 14 Rupert Neate, 'Liam Fox took five MPs to Washington with donor's money', *The Guardian*, 13 October 2011
- 15 Francis Elliott, 'Liam Fox accepted £50,000 from defence donor', *The Times*, 9 February 2010
- 16 <http://opencharities.org/charities/1099513> accessed 21/10/2011
- 17 Jamie Doward, 'Liam Fox's Atlantic Bridge linked top Tories and Tea Party Activists', *The Observer*, 15 October 2011
- 18 Andy McSmith, 'Hague forced to play down association with Werritty', *The Independent*, 17 October 2011
- 19 Jason Lewis, Robert Mendick and Patrick Hennessy, 'Fox affair: donors' fury over lies', *The Telegraph*, 15 October 2011
- 20 <http://web.archive.org/web/20050331020013/www.theatlanticbridge.com/articles/ScienceConference.htm> accessed 21/10/2011
- 21 *Ibid* (17) In a 2002 speech for TAB in New York
- 22 Andrew Grice, 'Fox faces a second inquiry as he turns his fire on media', *The Independent*, 20 October 2011