

Economists for Free Trade: Meet the ‘Independent Experts’ with Ties to Climate Science Denial Pushing a No Deal Brexit

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A pro-Brexit campaign group with ties to a neoliberal transatlantic network and climate science denial is emerging as a potentially influential player pushing for environmental deregulation and a “no deal” scenario.

[Economists for Free Trade \(EFT\)](#), formerly known as Economists for Brexit, has [made the news](#) recently following its [report](#) claiming that a cliff edge Brexit and adoption of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules would be “the very best” option for the UK.

The group claims to be a coalition of independent economists, but it has strong ties to Brexiteer Conservative MPs, right-leaning mainstream media and some well-known climate science deniers.

The group has long been pushing for a full break-up with the EU and has accused the Treasury and [civil servants of misleading the public](#) on the costs of Brexit and staying in the customs union.

The group’s findings that “no deal would be better than a bad deal” have [contradicted most other studies on the issue](#) and have been widely criticised as “[doubly misleading](#)”.

Members



Led by Patrick Minford, professor of economics at Cardiff Business School, a former advisor to Margaret Thatcher and supporter of the controversial poll tax, the EFT uses its strong

connections with the mainstream right-wing media to push its agenda of deregulation while giving a platform to some of its members' climate science denial views.

With [a team of 18 members](#) writing reports and about free-trade and Brexit and [13 advisors](#), the EFT is heavily male and only includes one woman, former trade negotiator Andrea Hosso.

Its members and advisors boast wide-ranging networks including across the political and media spheres while also including millionaire businessmen representing significant private interests.

It includes MPs such as chair of the European Research Group [Jacob-Rees Mogg](#), member of the EU scrutiny committee and former minister of state for the department for exiting the EU David Jones, and the climate science denying former environment secretary, [North Shropshire MP Owen Paterson](#).

Influential columnists such as the Sunday Telegraph's [Liam Halligan](#), founder of Conservative Home Tim Montgomerie and The Times' [Matt Ridley](#), a coal baron and prominent climate change denier, are also among the group's ranks.

Climate change and deniers

The Brexit debate has provided climate science deniers with [an influential space](#) within neoliberal, free market and pro-Brexit organisations to push their agenda.

As DeSmog UK has [previously reported](#), there is a significant cross-over between [networks of hardline Brexiteers advocating deregulation](#) over food and environmental standards and the [UK's climate science deniers](#).

For instance, the EFT's convener, Edgar Miller, an American businessman from Texas and a visiting fellow at Cass Business School in London, [made his fortune by investing in the US shale gas industry](#) and has been named as [an early donor](#), fundraiser and founder of the climate science denying [Global Warming Policy Foundation](#) (GWPF), led by former chancellor [Nigel Lawson](#).

In 2014, Miller [told DeSmog UK](#) he was "proud" of his donations to the GWPF and "intended to continue to contribute".

At the time, DeSmog UK also reported that [Miller financed](#) Ukip supporter [Christopher Monckton](#), whose research has repeatedly denied global warming and climate science.

Meanwhile, two of the UK's most prominent climate science deniers, former environment secretary [Owen Paterson](#) and Times columnist [Matt Ridley](#), an [advisor](#) to the the [GWPF](#), both advise [the EFT](#).

EFT member Kevin Dowd, [professor](#) of finance and economics at Durham University, is also registered as an [adjunct scholar](#) for the [Cato Institute](#), a libertarian thinktank based in Washington DC and funded by big fossil fuel lobby such as the [Koch brothers](#).

[Several EFT reports](#) on issues regarding Brexit and deregulation include references to Colin Robinson's book Climate Change Policy: Challenging the Activists, which was published by

the [Institute for Economic Affairs](#) in 2008. In the book, Robinson challenges the scientific consensus that wide-ranging government intervention is necessary to combat the effects of climate change. He argues that there is [uncertainty about the economics and climate science](#) and that the free market economy will better deal with climate change than government-led regulation.

Hard-Brexit

First formed to fly the banner for Brexit, the EFT has recently been focusing on pushing for a no-deal scenario and securing free-trade agreements. It has argued that [leaving the EU could add £135bn to the British economy per year](#) and that the [UK's poorest families will be "the biggest winners"](#).

Both arguments have been debunked as false by other economists and organisations.

Yet, the EFT has been feeding its narratives into other thinktanks and campaign groups working out of [a couple of offices close to Westminster in Tufton Street](#), where nine free-market organisations, including climate science deniers, have been accused of [colluding](#) in pushing hard-Brexit messages into the media. The TaxPayers Alliance, Leave Means Leave, the IEA, Civitas and Brexit Central were all accused by BeLeave whistleblower Shahmir Sanni of [mounting a coordinating campaign to push for a hard-Brexit in the media](#).

The EFT chair, Patrick Minford, [sits on the advisory team](#) of the [TaxPayers' Alliance](#). Founded in 2004 by former Vote Leave chief executive [Matthew Elliott](#), it campaigns for a low tax society and has argued against renewable energy targets. It is based [55 Tufton Street](#) alongside the [GWPF](#).

John Longworth, an EFT advisor, is the former director of the British Chamber of Commerce and the co-chairman and founder of hard-Brexit group Leave Means Leave, also based at 55 Tufton Street.

The EFT does not publicise its office address but the group shares the same telephone number as Leave Means Leave.

Longworth is also [a member of the advisory board of the Institute of Economic Affairs](#) (IEA).

Last week, an [undercover investigation](#) by Greenpeace's investigation unit Unearthed revealed potential US donors were being "offered ministerial access" to the likes of [Michael Gove](#), [Liam Fox](#) and former ministers [Steve Baker](#) and [Boris Johnson](#) to push for free trade deals and a hard-Brexit in what [IEA](#) director [Mark Lilltewood](#) was caught on tape describing as a "Brexit influencing game".

EFT advisor, Daniel Hodson, was also involved with Vote Leave as the [chair of the compliance committee](#) and is a [senior fellow](#) at the Brexit thinktank the [Legatum Institute](#).

Michael Burrage, another advisor to the EFT, is a senior research fellow at Civitas, a registered educational charity specialising in health, education and economics.

Civitas trustees [Sir Alan Rudge](#) and [Lord Nigel Vinson](#) respectively advise and fund climate science denial group, the [GWPF](#).

At least 11 of the EFT members and advisors are [regular contributors](#) to the media platform

Brexit Central.

Business interests

The EFT is also linked to businessmen representing private interests and who want to benefit from free trade deals.



This includes David Ord, co-owner of the [Bristol Port Company](#) and a member of the exclusive Bristol club the [Society of Merchant Venturers](#). The co-owner of the Bristol Port Company, [Terence Mordaunt](#), was last year announced as a Director of the climate science denial campaign group, the GWPF.

Ord is a major donor to the Tory party. Through his company, David Ord Ltd, he donated more than £1.2 million to the Conservative Party since 2005, according to [data](#) from the Electoral Commission.

The Bristol Port Company also donated [£100,000 to the Vote Leave campaign](#).

Ord is also the vice chairman of Open Europe, a pan-European policy thinktank which claims to be "[non-partisan and independent](#)" and advocates a close relationship between the UK and the EU post-Brexit. Open Europe [leases an office at 7 Tufton Street](#) from the Church of England charity the Society of the Faith.

Media on side

Thanks to the support of right-wing columnists, the EFT has been able to disseminate its message for a "clean" cut off from the EU on the 29 March next year in the mainstream press.

EFT member Liam Halligan, columnist for the Sunday Telegraph, has worked to push the group's message into the media writing in [his last column](#) on the subject "'No deal' is looking increasingly likely – and that's just fine".

Last year, the EFT's convener Miller also penned [a column](#) for the Telegraph arguing that "we shouldn't worry about the Brexit negotiations, no deal is better than what we have with the EU".

Halligan's influence goes beyond the media sphere. DeSmog UK previously reported that he [sits on a "committee of experts" closely](#) advising international trade secretary [Liam Fox](#) on trade.

Halligan has previously expressed sympathetic views towards climate science deniers. Reporting on [Owen Paterson's](#) 2014 lecture to the GWPF during which the North Shropshire MP attacked the climate consensus and called for the repeal of the Climate Change Act, Halligan described his intervention as "[a corker](#)".

Halligan is also the co-author of Clean Brexit - making the case for how the UK can make a success of Brexit - with EFT co-founder [Gerard Lyon](#), former chief economic adviser to Boris Johnson during his time as mayor of London and [chief economic adviser](#) to the Policy Exchange.

EFT advisors also include hardline Brexiteer Tim Montgomerie, previously a columnist at The Times, now editor of commentary website UnHerd and founder of ConservativeHome.

Times columnist [Matt Ridley](#) is also an advisor to the EFT. Ridley has repeatedly used his columns to spread disinformation about climate change and oppose government-led actions to prevent dangerous warming. In [a recent column](#), he approvingly quoted figures from another EFT member, Michael Burrage, without declaring his own affiliation to the group.

The Economists for Free Trade did not respond to our request for comment.

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