

Why Has a U.S. Republican Attack Operation Opened Shop in the UK?

And who is paying for their services?

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Speaking to a Conservative commentator this week, I asked was he aware of any changes in the UK lobbying industry. Had he, for example, noticed the arrival of any specialists in ‘opposition research’ – the practice of digging up damaging information on political, or corporate rivals – which has long been a feature of US politics?

Oh no, I was assured. We don’t have anything like that here.

Well, maybe we didn’t, but we do now.

UK Policy Group was established in January last year by two senior Republican lobbyists: [Matt Rhoades](#), who ran Mitt Romney’s bid for the White House in 2012, and [Joe Pounder](#), former head of research for the Republican National Committee, a “master of opposition research”.

Rhoades and Pounder run an elite Republican lobbying firm in Washington called Definers Public Affairs. Both men are also closely associated with a US political fund, or ‘[super PAC](#)’, called [America Rising](#), with whom Definers [shares](#) an office, and there is a well-oiled revolving door between the two. UK Policy Group was set up as the London ‘affiliate’ of this group.

Definers and America Rising are both specialists in ‘opposition research’.

[America Rising](#) exists solely to attack Democrat politicians. It sees its job as exposing the ‘truth’ on political opponents and uncovering ‘Democrat hypocrisy’, as the super PAC [puts it](#). During the 2016 US election cycle its purpose was to erode support for Hillary Clinton, which included targeting material to deter potential Clinton supporters on the left. Pounder [revealed](#) in 2016 that their file on Clinton, which they had compiled over four years, ran to ‘over 7,000 pages of distilled research’ and more than 10,000 video clips.

America Rising, whose [biggest donor](#) is hedge-fund billionaire and ‘vulture capitalist’, **Paul Singer**, is now [taking aim](#) at potential 2020 Democrat presidential candidates including **Elizabeth Warren**, **Andrew Cuomo** and **Bernie Sanders**, [with the aim of](#) attaching negative ‘narratives’ to opponents early in the campaign cycle. It [uses](#) ‘trackers’ to follow target Democrats around, [filming their public appearances](#) in a bid to catch them saying something that could be used now, or in the future, to undermine, or [embarrass](#) them.

[Dubbed](#) the ‘unofficial research arm of the Republican Party’, America Rising is a clearinghouse for opposition research within Republican campaigns.

Rhoades and Pounder originally [registered](#) their London affiliate with Companies House as ‘UK Rising’, aligning it with the political attack fund they co-founded rather than their commercial lobbying firm, Definers Public Affairs (UK Rising underwent a name change to UK Policy Group in May last year). The US lobbying firm also [registered](#) the web domain UKRising.co.uk.

Definers, like America Rising, also [creates](#) ‘dossiers on opponents, competitors and agitators’, but for [corporate clients, trade bodies and wealthy individuals](#). It does this, it says, by searching the public record, including social media, news reports and legal records, to find ‘high impact information’, which it then packages up in ‘media-friendly formats’ that can be used to influence public debates. This is ‘painstaking’ work, [says](#) Definers, trawling through documents, or YouTube videos to find its opponent’s ‘vulnerability’.

Employees in the London branch are now being [trained up](#) in these skills by their American counterparts. UK Policy Group similarly [promises](#) to provide ‘dossiers’ on ‘targets’ that provide ‘comprehensive, detailed analysis’ of an opponent’s record, background and views, information which, they say, can be used to shape stories in the media. UK Policy Group [has said](#) that its services will be aimed at private sector clients.

UK Policy Group’s all-male leadership team isn’t from the commercial world though, but appears instead to be drawn almost exclusively from the Conservative Party, including some with a background in opposition research.

[Andrew Goodfellow](#), who leads the UK operation, was until his appointment director of research for the Conservative Party where he specialised in opposition research. The Guido Fawkes blog [describes](#) Goodfellow a ‘super sleuth’. ‘You may not have heard of him,’ [it says](#), ‘but you’ve certainly read his work.’

UK Policy Group also employs [James Caldecourt](#), another specialist in opposition research from the Conservative Research Department, whose biography says he was part of George Osborne’s Treasury team. The Tories’ head of media monitoring operation until July 2017, [Pelham Groom](#), now runs UK Policy Group’s ‘media monitoring war-room’. The team also includes [Matthew van Horen](#), who previously worked for the Conservative Party and for the lobbying firm of its election guru, [Lynton Crosby](#), and [Louis McMahon](#), an ex-Parliamentary aide, who says he worked for two government ministers.

[Chris Brannigan](#), recent special adviser to **Theresa May** in No.10, is also an advisor to UK Policy Group, among other firms. He recently [told](#) openDemocracy that he has “never carried out research on opposition politicians”.

Both UK Policy Group and Definers Public Affairs were contacted and invited to comment on this article, including on the apparent similarities between America Rising and UK Policy Group, but has yet to receive a reply.

The “dark art” of opposition research

Writing on the UK Policy Group website, founder Joe Pounder [says](#) that opposition research is unfairly maligned and in need of a rebrand. He criticises the media for using terms such as “dark arts”, “peddling” and “salacious” to describe what he and his employees do for a

living.

But the weaponisation of information in elections – for the explicit [purpose](#) of defining a political opponent in the eyes of voters, increasing their ‘negatives’, depressing their support, and driving away potential voters – is not like ‘any other type of information-gathering’, as Pounder suggests. Yes, the Democrats are at it too. But, it is anti-democratic.

Democracy requires the free flow of opinions and debate; a robust political opposition; and a healthy media – all of which can be undermined by the type of opposition attacks, propagated through social media, that were deployed in the 2016 ‘Big Oppo’ election in America, as Pounder [described](#) it.

Also crucial to a functioning democracy is transparency, including public knowledge of the actors involved. And around UK Policy Group, there is none. The firm, which arguably looks like an alternative research arm of the Conservative Party, says that the current political turbulence in the UK [makes it](#) an ‘ideal location’ for Definers and any clients seeking to ‘influence public opinion’.

But, who is paying UK Policy Group for these services? And which opponents are they being employed to target? Are they political, as well as corporate? And to what end: how are their tactics, honed by their US colleagues, influencing public debate in Britain?

As Brexit gathers pace, and four years out from the next general election, it is in the public interest to know.

This article will be updated if UK Policy Group or Definers Public Affairs reply to our request for comment.

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