

MEDIA GUIDELINES:

Reporting the TaxPayers' Alliance



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Five top tips

1. Give context

The TaxPayers' Alliance is a right-wing pressure group – and so should be described as a 'right-wing pressure group'. Additional adjectives may be used at your discretion.

2. Use initiative

When presented with a TPA press release, aim to rewrite at least half of it. Try getting a second opinion. Or failing that, Google.

3. Add perspective

The TPA calls itself a 'grassroots alliance' of 'ordinary taxpayers'. But it doesn't have a membership – just a free-to-join mailing list of 20,000, which represents 0.04% of taxpayers. This compares with, say, the 1.3 million taxpayers who are members of the public sector trade union, Unison.

4. Name names

'Ordinary taxpayers' who support the TPA include: Sir Tom Cowie (Life President, Arriva), Sir Rocco Forte (Chairman, Rocco Forte Hotels), Peter Hargreaves (CEO, Hargreaves Lansdown), Malcolm H.D. McAlpine, (Director, Sir Robert McAlpine), Stuart Wheeler (Chairman, IG Group), and Lords Salisbury, Pearson, Derwent, Hodgson, Chadlington, Kalms and Vinson.

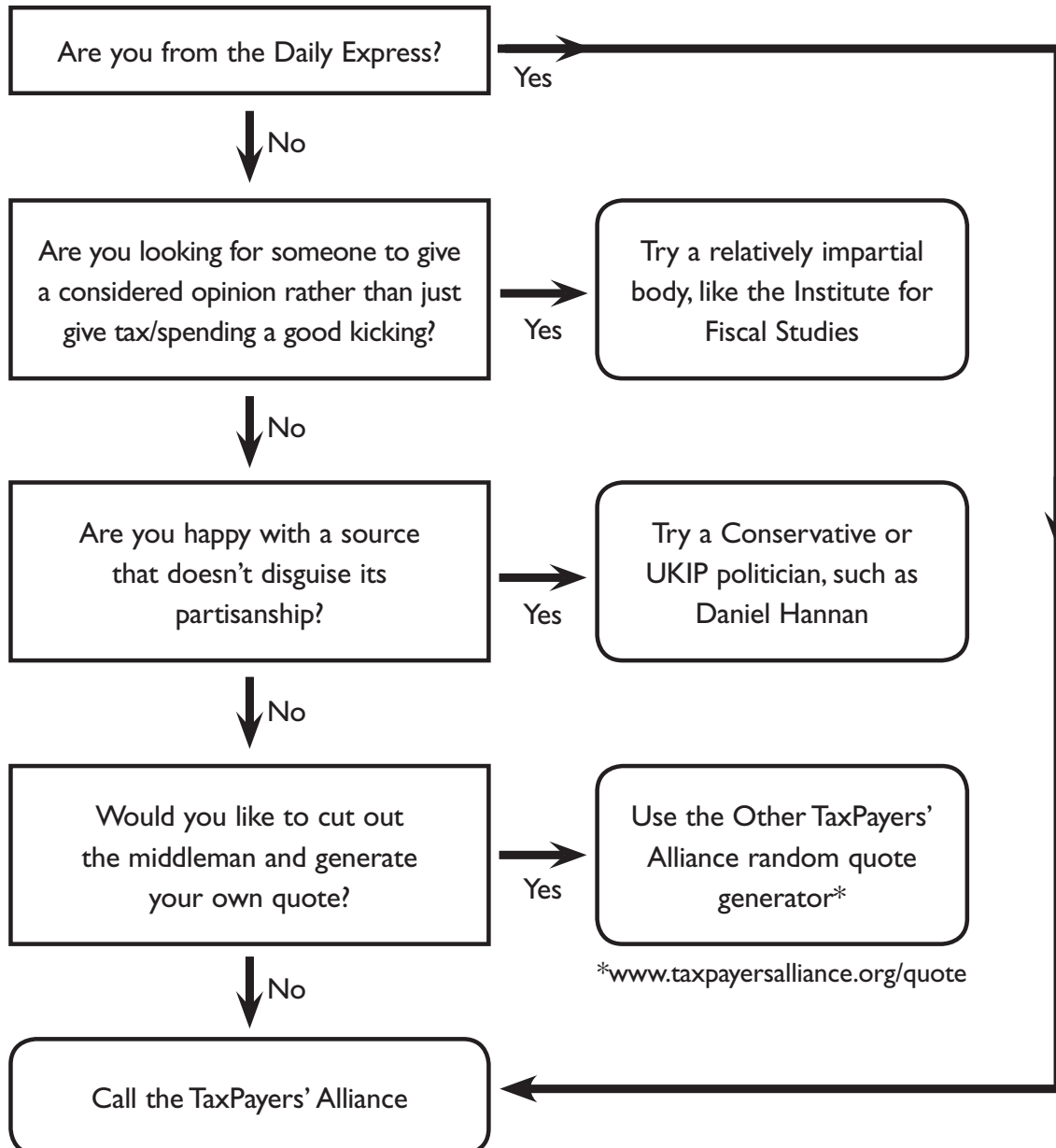
5. Investigate

Who funds the TaxPayers' Alliance? Why won't it tell us – or even reveal its income?

For more background information on the TaxPayers' Alliance, visit the Other TaxPayers' Alliance website: www.taxpayersalliance.org

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Case study I: MEP ratings

“If the Prime Minister had deliberately set out to snub the voters, he could hardly have chosen a better way than appointing Glenys Kinnock as Minister for Europe... She's one of the most notorious junketeers, ranked by the TaxPayers' Alliance 71st of the 78 British MEPs in terms of value for money and commitment to tackling corruption.”
 – *Daily Mail*, 9 June 2009

The following is an edited extract of a report published by the Other TaxPayers' Alliance on 4 June 2009:

Is the TaxPayers' Alliance's latest report, “Could Do Better? Grading the Performance of British MEPs”, its worst ever?

MEPs are measured against criteria including “campaigning activity”. This is defined as “their frequency as internet hits, demonstrating campaigning and local activity”. However many times I read that explanation – and despite working as a web designer – I don't understand it.

The report's “methodology” section has a longer definition: “Internet count of ‘name’ plus ‘MEP’, rated in proportion to the most reported. The baseline figure has been set at 30,000 hits, as this has been reached by 5% of the MEPs, from multiple parties. Unusual personal names, for instance accented ones or ones with variants, receive broader search latitude. This can be a measure of the activity of the individual in the constituency attending public events as reported in the local media, and in pursuing major campaigns.”

Still as clear as mud, but I'll take that to mean they did a Google search for each name followed by “MEP” and wrote down the number of results. In which case we ought to be celebrating Britney Spears and Paris Hilton as among our highest-performing MEPs in terms of campaigning activity.

The report also judges the 78 MEPs over how they voted on “key transparency, red tape, spending controls and anti-corruption legislation”. This is an arbitrary list of things the TPA agrees with, so voting to opt out of the working time directive wins points, but supporting closer European integration loses them.

And the result of this survey? Nearly all the top performers are Tories, while the worst performers are almost exclusively Labour. Former UKIP MEP Ashley Mote is ranked relatively highly at number 19 despite having been sentenced to nine months in jail for benefit fraud since he was elected. And Robert Kilroy-Silk appears at number 15, although he has the worst European Parliament attendance record among UK MEPs.

The report was written by Dr Lee Rotherham. A lengthy bio mentions his MPhil and PhD, and that

“The report was written by Dr Lee Rotherham. A lengthy bio neglects to mention that he is a twice-defeated Conservative candidate”

he is “one of the most experienced researchers on EU issues working in British politics”, but neglects to mention that he is a twice-defeated Conservative parliamentary candidate.

While the Mail and Telegraph appeared to take the report at face value, it was refreshing to see local and regional media – from

whom the TPA often gets most mileage – either ignore the survey or take a more critical stance. The Western Mail, for example, reported that “all four existing Welsh MEPs fare badly in the Taxpayers' Alliance report published today, though serious questions have been raised about the report's methodology”, and gave reasonable space to the report's critics.

So two cheers to the Western Mail. And three cheers to those newspapers that did the obvious thing and dumped this “research” in the bin.

Case study 2: Council 'non-jobs'

"Moronic Moray"

– The Sun, 31 December 2008

The following is an edited extract of a report published by the Other TaxPayers' Alliance on 5 Feb 2009:

In August 2008, the TPA's "grassroots co-ordinator" Tim Aker (salary undisclosed) took exception to Moray Council advertising for a "Street Football Co-ordinator" (salary £19,887), who would work "to improve the health and well being of children and young people in Moray" and be "willing to travel and work unsociable hours".

"Can you contain the rage?" he raged. "This is unbelievable. Councils now engaging in planning and funding 'street football'. All you need for football is a few jumpers for goalposts and a ball... Believe you me when I say this job is going in our non-job report in December."

And, true to his word, it did.

The TPA loves these surveys – they can be counted on to generate outraged national and local headlines across the country. (Its most recent survey "exposed" council middle management pay – except it managed to skew the statistics by including teachers.)

The tabloids lapped it up. "It's boom time for ludicrous jobs," scoffed the Daily Mail, barely rewriting the TPA's press release. "Moronic Moray," screamed the Sun.

But the Scottish national and regional press didn't play ball. "Council shows group red card over non-job claim," was the Press and Journal's headline, and it came up with the novel idea of reporting what the council as well as the TPA had to say.

The Sunday Herald went further. Far from being ashamed, Moray Council was proud of its street football scheme. The post was part-time and so the real salary was only half of that advertised, of which

Moray Council provided just £3,000. Grampian Police, Grampian Fire and Rescue Service, and several private companies funded the remainder. (If the TPA had bothered to look – nothing too strenuous, a Google search would have sufficed – they would have quickly discovered why Grampian Police were among the scheme's keenest backers.)

It's worth reading Moray Council's comments to the Herald in full, because they pretty much spell out everything that's wrong with TPA "research":

"More than 70 young people attend weekly street football games on Friday and Saturday evenings in Moray. There has been a marked reduction in the instances of anti-social behaviour – vandalism, teenage alcohol abuse and graffiti – in these targeted areas since the introduction of street football, saving many thousands of pounds."

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"I realise that the TaxPayers' Alliance need to grab headlines to attract the donations that keep them in a job, but their poor research lets them down. All they have done is scan for job adverts and picked out those that sound quirky."

"Far from being the self-appointed scrutineers they set out to be, the TaxPayers' Alliance appear to have become a cash-generating body whose raison d'être is to generate puff to keep their staff in a job. What a pity, they could be so much more useful."

Quotes

“It is so one-sided that one almost yearns for some opposition on the subject. Apart from Dame Polly [Toynbee], is no one out there prepared to challenge the Taxpayers’ Alliance and defend public spending? ... The achievement of the Taxpayers’ Alliance is to make one word synonymous with tax: waste.”

– Ross Clark, *The Spectator*, 8 Oct 2008

“The TaxPayers’ Alliance... has popped up in our papers more than three times every day this year. This is rather more than the five mentions this year of the Tax Justice Network, an independent coalition of researchers who focus on tax avoidance and tax havens. Last month they were 100 stories ahead of the next most mentioned charity/pressure group.”

– Patrick Barkham, *The Guardian*, 17 March 2008

“I think the Alliance provides a worrying sign of the likely future of public debate, where PRs and well-funded interest groups, rather than traditional media (for all their faults), dominate debate. It won't make for sensible public discussion.”

– Alex Hawkes, *Accountancy Age*, 9 Oct 2008

“I helped [the TPA] with their initial fund raising and organising but I got disillusioned because their first publication, *The Bumper Book of Government Waste*, mixed up capital and revenue and different years and wasn't really a serious analysis of waste ... Much of what they do though is to pull out facts and figures from published sources without understanding them.”

– Phil Taylor, *Conservative councillor*, 2 Feb 2009

“Journalists are often now so overstretched that a lot of work that used to be carried out in the newsroom is carried out by groups like the TPA ... What you see now is journalists who are grateful for news which is almost perfectly packaged to go into the paper with a ready top line. In that sense, journalism is becoming very passive.”

– Paul Lashmar, *quoted in the Independent*, 4 Aug 2008



The Other TaxPayers’ Alliance receives no funding – and is run on a volunteer basis by graphic designer and former journalist Clifford Singer, with help from an informal network of bloggers. We are happy to be described as left-wing and make no claim whatsoever to represent all taxpayers.

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