



Operational Case Report

The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) (800065)

About the charity

The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) was launched in 1988. Its objects are to promote research into (and publication of the results) and education of the public in the economic, social and political sciences and in science and technology. It describes itself as the UK's leading progressive think tank.

In June 2014 it launched 'The Condition of Britain' final report, following a two year work programme, described by IPPR as "offering a comprehensive assessment of the state of British society after the crash and setting out an ambitious programme of social renewal in these tough times".

Why the commission got involved

The commission received a complaint that the charity had supported a political party, which is inconsistent with charity law and our guidance on political activity and campaigning.

In particular it was alleged that the charity had worked closely with the Labour Party in producing its 'Condition of Britain' report and had undertaken a research commission from a Shadow Secretary of State relating to jobseeker's allowance.

The 'Condition of Britain' report was launched by Mr Ed Miliband at an event in London with a key note speech which was widely covered in the media.

We considered whether the report and the charity could, in the public's mind, be seen to support the Labour Party.

A charity cannot give financial support, or support in kind, to a political party. It must always guard its independence and political neutrality.

We were also aware of an allegation reported in the media that the charity received donations from the TUC and published a report calling for more trade union power.

We wanted to consider whether this might be an inappropriate political activity aimed at influencing law and policy in favour of funders.

The action we took

We examined in detail the report and the work funded by grants from the TUC and had constructive engagement with both trustees and senior staff concerning the complaint and the wider work of the charity. The trustees co-operated with us throughout. We provided the trustees with regulatory advice and the trustees have looked further at their procedures to safeguard their independence and ensure political neutrality.

What we found

We found that the charity works on a wide range of educational and research projects with diverse partners including civil society, businesses, trade unions, the public sector and educational institutions. The charity also provided evidence of extensive engagement across the political spectrum, including hosting events with politicians from all the major political parties.

We found that the 'Condition of Britain' report was independently commissioned by the charity and not funded by or at the request of a political party. The charity took reasonable care to ensure the report was identified as its work. The report was editorially independent and financed by a number of individuals, charities and public bodies. We consider that the report advances charitable purposes to educate the public.

However, the commission reached the conclusion that the charity exposed itself to the perception that it supported the development of Labour Party policy because:

- there had been close involvement with the Labour Party and its representatives throughout the project - the preliminary roadshow events for the Report featured one or more speakers from the Labour Party and Mr Miliband spoke at the high profile launch event
- the emerging findings of the research were only made available to the Labour Party on request - although the charity would have made them available to any political party had they made similar a request
- whilst the charity naturally wanted a high profile figure to launch the policy to gain maximum publicity, the final launch event was used as an opportunity and platform for Labour Party policies to be announced

The charity explained to us its consideration of the risks and how it works generally to protect its independence. Politicians from the Conservative Party and Liberal Democrats have announced policies at the charity's events and it has made its emerging findings available on other research projects to both of these parties. Nevertheless, we consider that, given the extent of the media exposure, the public perception of the charity's independence could have been adversely affected. It could therefore look further at the procedures it has in place for safeguarding its independence.

Although the charity's senior staff had been approached by a Shadow Secretary of State to undertake research on Jobseeker's allowance, they had confirmed that the charity could not undertake commissions from political parties, but that it was in any case already investigating issues of contributory welfare as part of the 'Condition of Britain' report.

The commission found no evidence that IPPR had been commissioned by the TUC to undertake work on trade union power or that it had recommended calling for “more trade union power”. IPPR received three grants from the TUC totalling £37,350 during 2013. These were for separate reports on tax reform, OECD labour markets and commercial energy efficiency. This work was in furtherance of the charity’s objects.

Lessons for others

The guiding principle of charity law in terms of political activity is that charities should be, and be seen to be, independent of party politics. This is particularly important for charities such as think tanks which operate in the political sphere. They should be careful of becoming associated in the minds of the public with a particular political party and should always ensure that their independence and political neutrality are protected in all that they do.

Inviting speakers associated with a particular political party carries risks for a charity, which trustees are expected to manage and mitigate. Where this happens on a regular basis, we would expect a charity to have a written policy and clear procedures in place to manage the risk and protect its reputation. It should also be able to demonstrate evidence of engagement with politicians from across a range of parties in the totality of its work.