

Oil giant's lobbying firm provided 'admin support' to MPs investigating energy crisis

Calls for greater oversight of parliamentary groups after concerns raised about Tory backbench committee



A BP oil platform in the North Sea; Tory MPs on the backbench committee are in favour of 'sensible' new fossil fuel projects. Photograph: Reuters

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A lobbying firm whose clients include the oil giant **BP** provided “administrative support” to a committee of Conservative MPs conducting an inquiry into the energy crisis.

Crowne Associates took meeting minutes and helped compile reports for the **1922 backbench committee on business, energy and industrial strategy**. The influential sub-committee, chaired by the former business secretary Andrea Leadsom, went on to recommend policies sympathetic to the oil and gas industry, including calling for a loosening of planning laws to enable fracking.

It also said many MPs supported “sensible” new fossil fuel projects including “maximising production from the North Sea basin”, and suggested the government promote “self-help” measures to help consumers to cut their own bills, such as turning down radiators.

The findings have prompted calls for greater oversight of backbench committees and will raise fresh concerns about the potential for fossil fuel lobbying in Westminster amid **climate breakdown** and an energy price crisis.

Crowne Associates’ link to BP, which it claims is unrelated to its work with the sub-committee, was not mentioned in the reports and came to light last week following analysis of transparency records by the *Observer*, four months after the firm’s work for the sub-committee began.

Leadsom declared on 27 July that since 21 March she had received about £2,093 worth of “secretariat support” from Crowne Associates, which describes itself as a “strategic advice agency”. The donation in kind was to support her role leading two inquiries relating to the energy sector – one into energy price rises and a second into geothermal heating, according to the entry.



Andrea Leadsom chairs the committee and declared receiving secretariat support from Crowne Associates. Photograph: PA Images/Alamy

The sub-committee subsequently published two reports – in March and July – bearing the official House of Commons emblem. The reports said secretariat

support had been provided by the Purpose Coalition, described on its website as a campaign tackling “social challenges”.

A footnote says it is run by This Is Purpose, a trading name for Crowne Associates, which represents clients including the Betting and Gaming Council and BP, according to the register of consultant lobbyists. The 1922 sub-committee said Crowne Associates and its clients had “no involvement or influence in any of the content [of its reports] at any time”.

Crowne Associates said its work for BP was separate from its work for the MPs, while BP said it had hired the company not to represent its interests in Westminster but to conduct research into social mobility.

But campaigners said the fact a lobbying firm was providing secretariat services to a parliamentary group raised concerns about the potential for lobbying in parliament and the possibility of private interests gaining front-row access to key policymakers and discussions.

Faye Holder, programme manager for oil and gas at the InfluenceMap thinktank, which tracks lobbying by polluting industries, said the arrangements could enable companies to “launder their influence” via “opaque intermediaries”.

She said: “This is highly concerning from a transparency point of view.”

Darren Jones, chair of the business, energy and industrial strategy (BEIS) committee and a Labour MP, added that private firms did not usually play a role in backbench committees because declaring benefits was “very difficult”. He said: “My view is that if backbench committees are going to be doing this kind of work, there should be additional regulation and oversight of the work they’re doing and the way in which they’re financed. It’s either a loophole or a black hole for regulation.”

He added that the use of the parliamentary logo on the 1922 sub-committee’s reports was a “red flag” that wrongly suggested they were official reports from parliament, not produced with support from industry. “If these reports are having influence on ministers, that would be very significant,” he said.

There has been a series of revelations about **lobbying by the fossil fuel industry**, which has been widely blamed for delaying the response to global warming since the first warnings in the 1980s.



BP said the company was 'hired by a completely different part of the business'. Photograph: Ben Stansall/AFP/Getty Images

Recent investigations into “back door” lobbying have focused on all-party parliamentary groups, which are informal cross-party groups of MPs, rather than backbench committees, which are made up of MPs from a single party who advise frontbenchers on policy. The central 1922 Committee of backbench Tory MPs is seen as pivotal in shaping policy and has historically wielded great sway over the party leadership. **Sir Graham Brady**, its chair, said sub-committees such as the BEIS one were elected under the central committee’s auspices but “entirely independent in their activities”.

A spokeswoman for Leadsom said the BEIS backbench committee was “grateful to have received secretarial support” from Crowne Associates in “writing up the minutes of independent evidence sessions and compiling the two reports so far” and said it had no influence over its work. The spokeswoman added that there was “no financial connection” with the committee and that the £2,093 sum declared in the register of interests from the firm was “purely notional”.

She said: “Each of the 1922 backbench committees identify and arrange their own secretarial support. The secretariat support provided by This Is Purpose is clearly disclosed in the report and in the MPs’ register in accordance with the guidelines.”

She said the use of the parliamentary logo was allowed on the reports because it was “clear” that backbench committees were not official committees, adding that the secretariat support from Crowne Associates was declared in July because “it did not reach the declarable threshold until the second inquiry was completed”.

Crowne Associates, trading as This Is Purpose, said its work for the MPs and BP was separate and that it was “not contracted by BP’s government affairs team”. It added: “The recommendations for the report are wholly the committee’s own and all our work is properly declared.”

BP said the company was “hired by a completely different part of the business to conduct research for our social mobility report which outlines how we can better support social mobility and support more apprenticeships and work placements”.