

Babelfish

Cleaning up politics

Next Edition

May 2026

CRUNCH TIME!

WE CAN END ALL OF THIS...

JENRICK ADMITS TO 'UNLAWFULLY HELPING DONOR AVOID £40M HIT'

EXCLUSIVE: Nigel Farage was given undisclosed £5m by crypto billionaire in 2024

Covid VIP fast lane for Tory donors results in £1.4bn waste

...IF WE'RE WILLING TO GIVE UP THIS



By Dale Vince OBE

Green Industrialist

ONE of Labour's biggest donors Dale Vince says the public's mistrust in "dirty" British politics can be cleaned up for the yearly price of a bag of crisps per person.

The green industrialist is calling for a ban on political donations and argues that campaigning should be paid for out of the public purse.

Vince, despite giving the Labour party more than £5million before the last general election, argues for the state to meet the "tiny cost" of "ensuring politicians make all their decisions in the national interest ... and not in the

interest of their own party donors". The activist wants to spark a national debate on the funding of political parties after concerns were raised that the government needed to go further in curbing foreign influence and "dark money".

Thai-based billionaire Christopher Harborne donated £12million to Reform UK last year, approximately two-thirds of the party's entire funding, with leader Nigel Farage forced to deny he had promised the crypto investor anything in return.

Vince, 64, argues that the £60million-plus donated on average to all parties over the past five years equates to less than the cost of a small packet of crisps per year.

He said: "We have the opportunity to clean up politics once and for all at such a small cost.

"A packet of crisps each. That's it. There may never have been as great a bargain as this."



FULL STORY: PAGES 4&5



BABELFISH: THE GREAT BARGAIN

WE'RE Babelfish. Not quite straight out of The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy – but in the same vein. A voice in your ear, making sense of the nonsense. Talking your language. Un-spinning the spin. We're a pop-up. New media, here to intervene – bearing facts, tongue in cheek, for fun, with purpose. In this, our third edition, we're taking a deep dive into the murky world of political donations. Fearful of foreign interference and dirty money polluting our politics, Labour has put a £100k cap on foreign

donations and banned crypto funding – but it's not enough. Who says so? Well, the British public as our polling proves. We've got some razor-sharp brains to think through the issues. Campaigner Dale Vince wants an end to political donations, full stop. Other ideas are available. The bottom line: Labour hasn't gone far enough. Time to be bolder, many argue. Please do let us know what you think. After all your voice has a right to be heard. We are Babelfish. We are here to help. Keep an ear out for us.



Britons won't pay for political party clean-up? Oh yes they will

THE MAJORITY of voters would back a complete ban on political donations, exclusive polling for Babelfish has revealed.

And twice as many people would choose a publicly funded approach over the current system – despite the small cost to each taxpayer, equivalent to the price of a standard packet of crisps per year.

Campaigner Dale Vince agrees, even though he has himself donated millions to Labour over the years.

He said: "Rather than dance around this issue from year to year, playing 'whack-a-mole' trying to close the latest loophole in donations, a ban on all donations is a simple, clear and enduring approach."

"No donations means no loopholes. As well as no influence."

A survey of over 2,000 people shows strong support for some sort of radical reform of political funding, which many believe threatens our democracy.

Cryptocurrency

The polling by Suvation found that a legal cap on the size of donations was favoured by almost two-thirds (64%).

And the most popular level for a cap was relatively low, at just £10,000.

However, senior Labour figures are reluctant to go further than the most recent changes made to the Representation of the People Bill which now stops UK donors who live overseas giving more than £100,000 and bans cryptocurrency donations.

But there are growing calls from their own MPs to introduce a domestic cap as well. Our Suvation results suggest that public opinion has moved well ahead of the political establishment on this issue.

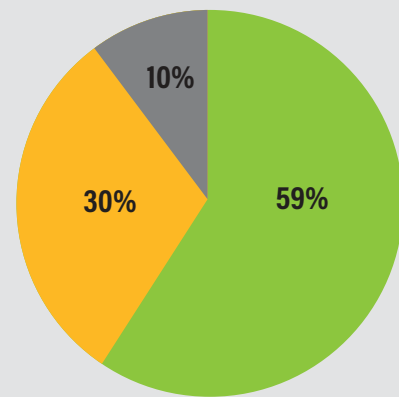
This is why Dale Vince is calling for a complete ban. He said: "If you talk to politicians about public funding for politics, they'll tell you the public don't want it. Turns out, they're out of touch."

"Our polling shows a clear and overwhelming appetite from the public to fix what's become a running sore in British politics – the corrosive influence of big money. Two-thirds of people support public funding and an end to private

Six out of 10 voters would choose to foot the cost of banishing the big money donors from politics

QUESTION: In 2024, £94million was spent on general election campaigns. If this were funded by the taxpayer it would cost us £2.51 each over a five-year election cycle, or 50p a year. What would you choose?

- Ban all political donations and replace with public funding
- Continue with the current system of private donors bankrolling campaigns
- Unsure



influence, whether real or perceived. People are fed up with the suspicion, the access, the sense that political decisions are being shaped by donors rather than the national interest. This is a chance to properly clean up politics, once and for all.

"And the cost? Around the price of a packet of crisps per person each year. A tiny price

to pay to make sure politicians work for the country – not their biggest donors."

Some MPs privately admit they would be reluctant to push for a new state system of political funding because they fear a backlash from the public whose trust in them reached an all-time low of just 5% in a poll of 45,000 people commissioned by Ecotricity last year.

But the mood of the nation is undoubtedly hardening – of those who said they would vote in a referendum on political donations, 71% said they would support a total ban, compared with 29% who would not.

Some 57% said the wealthy have too much influence and the system should be changed. Only 22% said it was currently broadly fair. Of the 64% who supported introducing an annual legal cap on donations, 26% supported a £10,000 limit, while 20% favoured £50,000.

The public is clearly very unhappy about big-money donors. When asked what worried them most, 39% said it was wealthy individuals having too much influence, compared with 19% who were more concerned about taxpayer money being used to support parties they do not back. But the government shows no signs of going any further just yet.

Earlier this year, after what Labour called landmark changes to protect UK democracy from the "scourge of foreign actors and financial influence", Steve Reed, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, identified the problem, saying: "Foreign interference and dirty money are menacing the integrity of our elections."

But still no plans to resist the scourge of domestic mega-donors are set to follow.

What the public thinks...by Dale Vince

ALLOWING political parties to be privately funded is fraught with risk and ripe with suspicion – for obvious reasons. Private money will always want something in return or at the very least be suspected of it.

And private money unarguably wants a certain political outcome, even if it's for what they might feel is the greater good. Why do we allow money to speak so loudly in our politics? We don't have to.

If you ask almost any politician however, they'll tell you the public does not want public money replacing private money.

But if presented with the facts, the tiny sums involved to ensure the integrity of our politics, would the public object?

We asked them, the answer we got back was clear. Overwhelming support for a ban on donations.

A significant majority believe that private

money has an undue influence in our politics and an even bigger majority supports the crypto ban. The public are with us. They see private donations as a problem, wealthy donors having too much say and crypto as the dodgy currency it's designed to be.

The British public supports public funding of our politics. It's the only way to entirely rule out undue private influence based on wealth and to ensure all decisions are made in the national interest not the interest of donors.

It's the best way to restore trust and faith in our democracy that's sorely lacking right now for good reason.

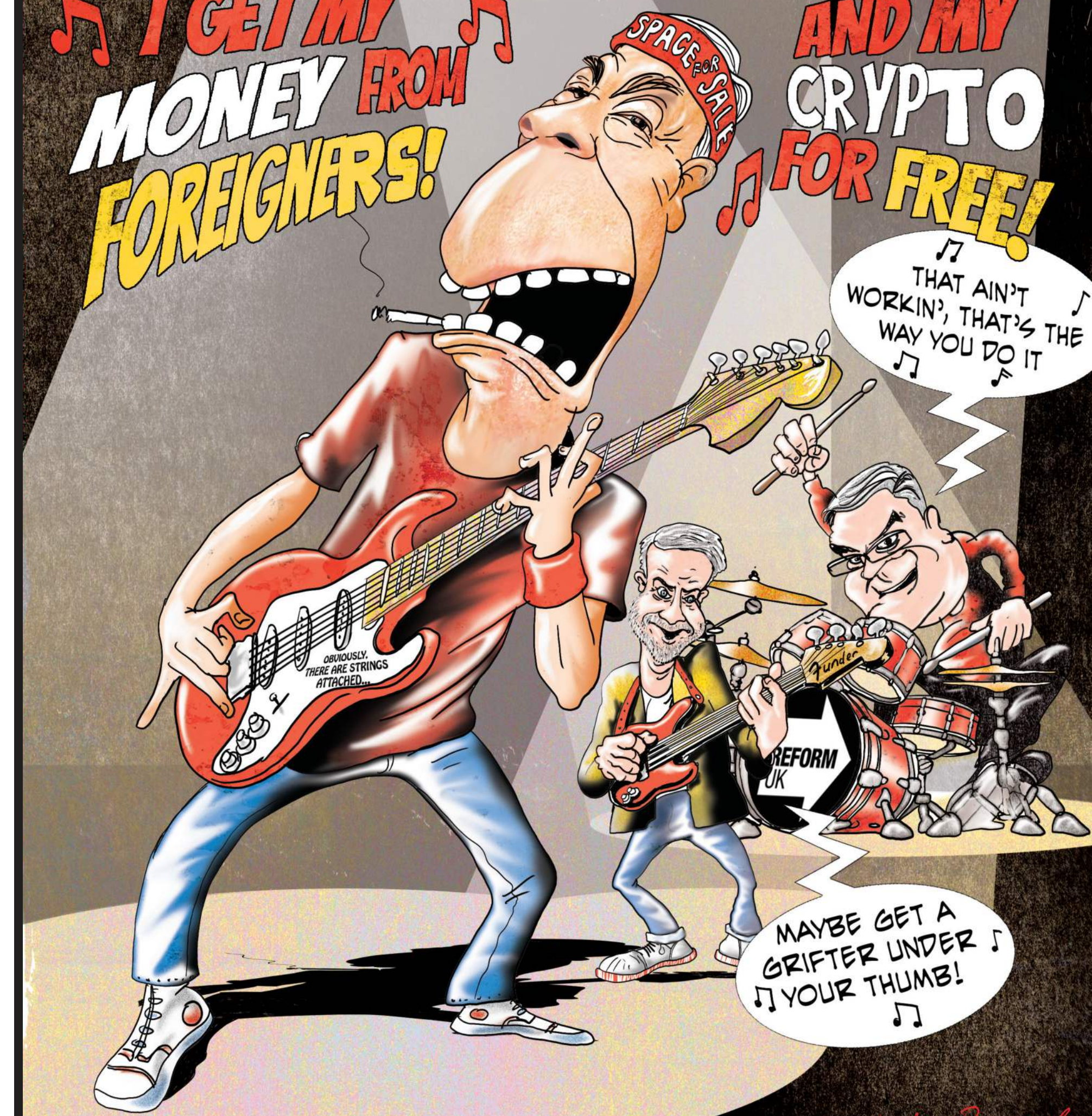
Our politics is for sale to the highest bidder – we can see the extremes this leads to if we just look to the USA. Let's do something bold about it, let's ban private money from political funding, we can be the first country in the world to do this. And for sure not the last.



DIRE STATE...

I GET MY MONEY FROM FOREIGNERS!

AND MY CRYPTO FOR FREE!



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Change the system..it won't cost a packet!

DALE Vince has urged Labour MPs to "restore trust in politics by taking private money out of it!"

The entrepreneur and campaigner argues that the public's shattered belief in our political system can only be rebuilt if there are "no donations in British politics".

He said: "Let's not fuss over what a donation limit should be, how much is too much and from where, let's end the constant game of dodgy donation 'whack-a-mole' - let's draw a simple line under it all - no donations in British politics. Super cheap, super effective - the end of all arguments and suspicion."

"The biggest single thing we can do to restore trust in politics, is to take private money out of it."

The government has brought in a cap on donations from British citizens living overseas at £100,000 and a temporary ban on all funding from cryptocurrency as part of its Representation of the People Bill.

But Vince says this action, while welcome as a first step, is "insufficient" to halt the malign influence on British politics from debatable sources with deep pockets. Senior Labour figures have questioned whether the public has any appetite to pick up the bill for political campaigning, arguing that individuals would resist paying to fund parties they oppose.

But polling commissioned by Vince's media outlet Babelfish shows there is overwhelming support for a ban on donations with a significant majority believing private money has undue influence on our politics.

Nearly two-thirds of those polled say there should be a legal cap on how much any individual or organisation should be free to hand over, with just 18% stating there should not be a cap, and the highest percentage (26%) believing it should be as small as £10,000.

Cash given to politicians and their parties has been thrust even further into the spotlight after the Guardian newspaper revealed Reform leader Nigel Farage failed to declare a £5million personal gift he received from billionaire cryptocurrency investor Christopher Harborne - weeks before he changed his mind and decided to run for office as an MP after all.

That is in addition to the £12million the Thai-based donor has since given to Reform UK in 2025 alone. Harborne previously gave large sums to the Tories when Boris Johnson was Prime Minister and also to Reform's predecessor the Brexit Party.

Qinetiq, a firm in which Harborne was the largest single shareholder, received an £80million Ministry of Defence contract from the Conservative government just weeks after he made a £1million donation to the Office of Boris Johnson. Labour has accused

Farage accused of 'conflict of interest' over £5m gift from crypto investor



EMPIRE KNOCKOUT Shamed Baroness Michelle Mone closes last company amid £122m PPE scandal

British crypto billionaire Ben Delo says he has given £4m to Reform UK
Delo, pardoned by Trump after violating US banking law, describes himself as a champion of free speech

Let's save Britain from dark money for the bargain price of a small bag of crisps



OUR economy is worth £3trillion a year. If it were a company it would be a monster. Even as an entire country it's a whopper, the sixth biggest in the world. We employ an army of civil servants - 500,000 of them - to run this huge enterprise.

That costs us £20billion a year. They do the bidding of the government of the day. Here's where it goes sideways - we allow our political parties to be funded by private money. The people with their hands on the steering wheel of our entire economy are privately funded.

It's a system of inherent risk, risk of self-interest over national interest, of government decisions being made to suit wealthy donors. And it's a system of inherent suspicion. Suspicion of motivation, of influence in decision making - it's corrosive to our politics, to our national conversation. We're never more than five minutes away from one allegation or scandal, or another. Perhaps more than any other single factor, the way we fund our politics has undermined belief in politics itself.



BY DALE VINCE OBE GREEN INDUSTRIALIST

And that's a very high price to pay indeed. And for what? Over the last five years the total of all donations to all parties is a mere £50m per year.

We struggle to contain the donor system, to prevent foreign and corrupt money entering our politics, most recently crypto donations - which by their very nature and design - are untraceable.

We play 'whack-a-mole' when we seek to constantly adjust to new funding loopholes - in our vain attempts to control where the money comes from. While we have no tools and no chance to control what influence the money given by donors actually has. Surely the answer to this is a simple ban on all donations. As a Labour donor I've met

a handful of major donors and I am certain that not a single one of them asks for or expects a single thing in return - me included. We all want a progressive government and we recognise the system we operate in requires people that can, to contribute to the funding needs of our party of choice.

But it's not the same with other parties, most noticeably right now with Reform, accepting huge sums in untraceable currency, enjoying the threat of even greater funding from some of the world's most unsavoury, foreign billionaires. It's bad enough we allow foreign ownership of our press - foreign money in our politics is rightly banned, but hard to prevent.

We've just had 14 years of Conservative government in which there were endless scandals involving money and influence. Robert Jenrick may be the poster child for this with his

unlawful planning decision made for a donor when in government and more recently with allegations he took foreign money when running for the Tory leadership. Cash for influence is a Tory thing, but not uniquely.

The unions that fund Labour openly demand influence on policy and stamp their feet when they feel unheard - not for self gain as such but influence in return for funding nonetheless.

£50million a year in private money controls the £20billion a year civil service army that runs our £3trillion economy.

That's how it boils down - for the want of a trivial sum in public funding we commit surely the world's greatest act of false economy, given the harm it brings.

But if you talk to politicians about the idea of public funding for our

politics, they'll tell you the public don't want it. But guess what, those politicians are out of touch. Our opinion poll shows a clear and overwhelming desire from the public to put right this running sore of a problem that causes us such great harm.

A significant majority of the public say yes to public funding, to the end of private influence, perceived or actual - an end to the endless suspicion and corrosion and undermining of public life.

It's not just because of what is at stake, of the opportunity we have to properly clean up politics, once and for all, but because we can do so at such a small cost - no more than a packet of crisps per person per year.

A tiny, tiny cost to ensure our politicians make all their decisions in the national interest, not in the interests of their own party donors.

A packet of crisps each. That's it. There may never have been as great a bargain as this.



Farage of breaking parliamentary rules by not declaring the £5million in the register of interests for MPs, and the Tories have referred him to the parliamentary standards commissioner. Farage claims the gift was "purely private" and intended to pay for his security.

Pressure is building on the government to further curb the influence of donors. Labour MP Alex Sobel is proposing a £1million cap on individual political donations in the UK. The Leeds Central and Headingley MP is tabling an amendment to the

Representation of the People Bill to prevent a "very small group of wealthy individuals buying out our whole political system". A review of foreign financial influence and interference in UK politics was ordered by the government after the conviction of the former Reform politician Nathan Gill



for accepting bribes from Russia-linked sources. And the independent report by Sir Philip Rycroft warned there is a risk of foreign interference in UK politics from Iran, Russia and China. His review also suggested parliament should consider a cap on all individual

donations "if it wishes to restore confidence in the political process and keep big money out of UK politics". New rules being introduced by Labour putting a cap on donations to parties by British citizens living abroad are already under threat of being circumvented. Billionaire Ben Delo,

convicted in the US for failing to implement adequate anti-money-laundering controls in his cryptocurrency business, has given £4m to Reform and now says he will moving back to the UK from Hong Kong for a while so that he can give more money. The Conservatives have been beset by

donor controversies. Former Tory peer Michelle Mone and her husband Doug Barrowman are under investigation over their alleged roles in a £148million Covid PPE scandal. Baroness Mone's husband donated more than £170,000 to the Tories before the couple benefited from PPE contracts.



THAT'S A BIT RICH!

Reform's biggest donors linked to offshore cash



BIG MONEY MATES: Christopher Harborne, left, gave millions to Nigel Farage and Reform
Picture: John Nguyen/ JNVisuals

“I don't believe the government has a right to stop me, and they won't”

Christopher Harborne says his huge political donations should be above the law

EXCLUSIVE

BY NICK SOMMERLAD

RICH people and companies linked to tax havens accounted for 80% of registered donations to Reform UK last year, Babelfish can reveal.

After scouring a year's worth of declarations to the Electoral Commission, we found 18 Reform donors with offshore links who gave the party almost £15million in 2025.

This exceeds the total registered donations to the Conservative party and is more than was given to Labour and the Lib Dems combined.

Our investigation raises important questions about what it means for our democracy when a party which could soon sweep to power is dependent on so much money from a handful of wealthy people who are linked to offshore cash – where they typically benefit from lower taxes and greater secrecy.

Reform's biggest donor is Thai-resident and crypto investor Christopher Harborne, who gave the party £12m last year, including a record-breaking £9m single payment.

Little is known about his finances but it was recently revealed that Harborne also gave leader Nigel Farage a £5m “personal gift”

before the last election. This was not declared when Farage was elected MP and he says it was given to provide him with lifetime security.

Harborne owns AML Global, a jet fuel business registered in the British Virgin Islands and Hong Kong, according to court documents. He also has a 12% stake in iFinex Inc, registered in the BVI, which owns crypto exchange Bitfinex and sister company Tether.

He is rarely interviewed, but told the Telegraph last month that he would find a way around government plans to cap political donations from Brits living abroad at £100,000.

Harborne said: “I think I'm the reason for that legislation. I don't believe the government has a right to stop me, and they won't. There is always a way, we just don't know what it's going to be yet.”

The second largest donor to the party last year was its treasurer Nick Candy, a property tycoon whose empire includes companies in Luxembourg and Guernsey. He gave £990,000.

The next most generous donor was deputy leader Richard Tice, who gave £613,000 through his company Tisun Investments. Tice set up a family trust offshore in Jersey and also controlled a company in the Channel Islands tax haven called Gellymill Ltd.

Reform UK's fourth biggest backer was businessman Bassim Haidar, who announced he was quitting the UK over changes to the

THE HYPOCRISY GAP



NIGEL FARAGE once labelled “rich people” who evade taxes as a “common enemy”. The then leader of UKIP denounced tax avoidance to the European Parliament. Farage himself has faced scrutiny for using offshore trusts and funnelling over £700,000 in earnings from GB News into his own private company to reduce his tax. He set up a trust fund in the Isle of

Man to cut inheritance tax bills. He insisted it was an “error” and he did not avoid tax. He has been found to have breached the MPs' code of conduct by failing to declare £380,000 in interests on time. The watchdog accepted it was “inadvertent”.

tax treatment of non-doms like himself. After considering Monaco, he relocated his family to Dubai in September 2024, telling MailOnline: “My biggest concern was tax on global assets and inheritance tax on global assets.”

Mr Haidar began donating to Reform and by the end of 2025 had given £355,000. These four men, two living abroad and all four former Tory donors, gave nearly £14m to Reform last year. Based on recent donations, it would

take the Green Party 25 years to register that amount. But we have found another 14 Reform donors with similar links to offshore, who gave between £25,000 and £200,000 last year.

They include a company owned by Tory mega-donors, JCB tycoons the Bamfords, who reportedly own their empire through Bermudan trusts. JC Bamford Excavators Ltd donated £200,000 to Reform last year. Lady Rothermere was behind a £50,000

donation. Her husband, the 4th Viscount Rothermere, controls the Daily Mail group of newspapers through a company based in Jersey.

Other British-registered companies owned via Jersey, the Isle of Man and the British Virgin Islands have given Reform £300,000 last year. All this is no accident.

After his appointment as treasurer, Candy told the Financial Times he would actively be recruiting cash from offshore: “We'll do events in restaurants, people's private homes and on yachts.”

“You have to be on the UK electoral register or the overseas electoral register or have a UK trading company.”

“There are plenty of people in Monaco, Switzerland, the Isle of Man, Guernsey, who can meet both of those criteria.”

The fifth largest donor to Reform UK we have been able to identify.

Oliver Evans gave them £340,000 but it is not possible to pin this money down to one individual.

In all, £733,000 came from 18 individuals who we have been unable to firmly identify. A Maria Rost gave £100,000 to Reform and a business owner of that name is linked via a UK company to the Cayman Islands.

An Oscar Townsley gave £30,000 and a



HAVING A LAUGH: Farage with Reform treasurer Nick Candy, who also donates huge sums

man of that name appears on Companies House as director of a company based in St Vincent and the Grenadines.

Five Reform donors who gave the party £12,555,000 last year – 67% of the total – live, or appear to live, abroad, according to information given to Companies House.

While the party distances itself from the disastrous last Conservative government, 78% of its funding last year came from 14 donors who have given, and even continue to give, to the Tory Party.

Tom Brake, CEO of Unlock Democracy, said: “No one should be allowed to buy influence by donating massive amounts of money to any party. When this

happens, the voices of tens of millions of voters are excluded.

“The government could start by [capping] all donations at £100k, not just those from abroad. Secondly, the government should require parties to turn down money from tax havens or when the true source cannot be guaranteed, such as crypto assets.

“These donors have an agenda. It is about tax avoidance and maximising their wealth, which deprives public services like the NHS and schools.”

Reform did not respond to a request for comment but has previously insisted that all donations follow the rules.

Britain standing at a crossroads... seize the moment!



BY SUSAN HAWLEY
SPOTLIGHT ON CORRUPTION

LAST year, UK politics faced a game-changing scenario: the world's richest man, Elon Musk, floated giving £100million to Reform UK. The donation didn't go ahead, after Musk apparently fell out with Farage. But there were rumours that he was planning to donate to Tommy Robinson's Advance UK party instead and he is now showing support for Rupert Lowe's Restore Britain party.

Many people were rightly horrified that a foreign billionaire could so easily make a donation that would completely distort the next UK general election – not to mention public political debate for the years running up to it.

The government is now introducing all sorts of measures to stop a Musk-type donation.

And its Representation of the People Bill going through Parliament has a lot of decent measures, with the government promising to ban crypto donations (at least for now), and limit donations from overseas voters to £100,000.

But there is a central gap at the heart of the government's strategy. It's not just foreign billionaires' money we should be worried about. We live in a globalised economy.

Trying to close loopholes for foreign money is like playing whack-a-mole. Meanwhile there are plenty of billionaires here in the UK – over 150 of them at the last count – who could take Musk's place.

And right now with absolutely no upper limit on how much someone can donate, there is nothing in place to stop an individual in the UK



INFLUENCE: Elon Musk may donate

with cavernous pockets essentially buying up a political party and its policies. This is how oligarchs do it in less democratic countries and we should be under no illusions that it can't happen here.

That should worry anyone who cares about how our democracy works. And poll after poll is finding that it does worry a lot of people. Just 13% of people polled last December thought that people should be able to give as much as they like to parties, while 63% of those polled last January thought the very rich have too much say in UK politics. The public are fed up with the voices of the wealthiest in society counting for more than those of ordinary people.

Attempts to get a cap a decade ago hit the buffers with party politics but with the government's new bill there is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to stop money dictating our politics rather than the public interest. One way to do this is to ensure the government's new bill contains clear language that there will be a donation cap in principle, and an agreed process to work out what the cap should be.

The public should have a big say in an independent review, and all options should be on the table, including introducing a state-funded system as many of our European counterparts and countries such as Canada already have.

This is a historic moment – and British democracy is at a crossroads. The question is whether the government is willing to seize it.

Farage builds war chest as he hobnobs with the tycoons of Dubai

EXCLUSIVE
BY NICK SOMMERLAD

NIGEL Farage has not declared the sources of funding for any of the lavish hospitality he received during a two-day trip to Dubai to drum up donations from wealthy tax-exile expats and rub up against rich Emiratis.

But we can share new details of the trip, where he was hosted by billionaires who count the Tate brothers among guests. Farage is considered favourite to be Prime Minister after the next election, after Reform UK celebrated unprecedented electoral success earlier this month, winning throughout Labour's heartlands.

The party is building a war chest ahead of the general election due by the summer of 2029. Last year it registered more donations than any other party and at the start of this year it focused on Dubai.

One of the United Arab Emirates, Dubai does not have the largest population of British expats in the world – but it is likely to have the wealthiest.

Farage was accompanied on his trip in January by party treasurer Nick Candy, who has business interests in Dubai, and Tory defector Nadhim Zahawi, who has property and extensive connections there.

Farage told wealthy donors at a private lunch that "Britain is broken" but that he wanted to lure them back. According to reports, he said: "What I've noticed is that nearly all of London now lives in Dubai. They fled for a variety of reasons, and one

of the reasons is a bloke called Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London. It is a complete disaster. Law and order is collapsing, we're taxing everybody out of the country.

"When we're in government, some of the Brits will come back to London. At least I hope some of you might come back to London for some of the year."

Bloomberg reported that the lunch was funded by Indian tycoon Sunny Varkey, an education entrepreneur based in Dubai.

Varkey owns 17 fee-paying schools in England through his £57million-a-year Bellevue Education Group.

Labour imposed 20% VAT on private school fees last year, in opposition to Reform UK, which went into the last election promising an additional 20% tax break for private schools.

One guest posted that the "immaculately arranged luncheon to welcome the team to the UAE" was arranged by Reform's deputy treasurer Amanda Gutkin, who also has business connections in the UAE.

Later that day, Farage was the guest of honour at a "special evening invitation hosted by the Bingham Family", according to the same guest.

The Binghamts are one of Dubai's wealthiest property developers. Hussain Bingham Aljibri is ranked by Forbes as one of the richest men in the Middle East, with a \$2.5billion (£1.8bn) fortune.

A video posted online last year shows members of the Binghamti family hosting influencer and self-confessed misogynist Andrew Tate and his brother Tristram. Tristram Tate claims to own an apartment in one of many luxury towers built by the Binghamts. Andrew Tate is facing criminal

and civil cases in the UK, US and Romania over allegations including rape and sexual assault, which he denies.

A spokesperson for the Binghamts did not respond to a request for comment.

Among guests who posed with Farage was Italian tango dancer turned PR fixer Paolina Antognetti. Her clients include Reform UK donors, United Kingdom Sotheby's International Realty Limited which is a separate company to Sotheby's auction house, with different ownership.

Her business dealings take her from London, where she met Reform UK treasurer Nick Candy in March, to Moscow, from where she posted a photo last month, saying she was "exploring new markets".

During a trip to Russia last year she posed with sanctioned Russian politician Leonid Slutsky and thanked him for "your generous hospitality and an incredible week filled with valuable opportunities".

Sanctioned

Hard-right Slutsky, a staunch defender of Putin's war on Ukraine, was sanctioned by the US, Canada and the EU following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Antognetti did not respond to our requests for comment.

The next evening, Farage spoke at an exclusive GB News event on the rooftop of the Ritz-Carlton hotel, joined by Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber, the UAE industry minister.

According to Middle East Eye, Farage told around 80 guests: "Look around at the palms, I want Clacton to look like this."

He reportedly told the Emiratis: "We

have a lot to learn from you, my dear sirs. We recognise you are our friends. A Brexit London, a Reform London, will remember you."

Lib Dem MP Lisa Smart said: "Nigel Farage has already faced serious questions over an undeclared £5m gift from a crypto tycoon. Now it seems Reform UK is rinsing Dubai donors to fill its coffers too.

"It is the height of hypocrisy for a party that claims to be 'anti-establishment' to be bankrolled by bitcoin billionaires."

Several of Farage's Reform lieutenants have ties to Dubai. They include deputy leader Richard Tice,



NIFTY FOOTWORK: Dancer turned PR specialist Paolina Antognetti. Above, with Nigel Farage and, left, with Leonid Slutsky

Pictures: Instagram/@paolinaantognetti

Huge wads of cash that taint our democracy



BY KEVIN MAGUIRE
POLITICAL COMMENTATOR

NIGEL Farage hitting the jackpot with a secret, personal £5million gift from Chakrit Sakunkrit and Christopher Harborne, the two names of Thai-based crypto tycoon and Reform UK's fairygodfather, illustrated British democracy is not just for sale but has been bought by a billionaire outside our country.

No wonder the rival Conservative Party on the right of politics referred the huge present uncovered by the Guardian newspaper to Parliament's standards committee, citing rules requiring MPs to declare any "personal benefit" received in the 12 months before taking office and to do so within a month of being elected.

Follow the money and Harborne/Sakunkrit, whose vast global fortune would potentially be inflated even higher by Farage and Reform's plans to turbo-charge bitcoin in Britain, also invested more than £22m in the wannabe Prime Minister's parties on top of that £5m – and contributed two-thirds of all Reform funding.

Labour, Tories and other parties are tainted by huge wads of cash, including from filthy-rich magnates living abroad, yet now Reform is creating a super league of its own, it demands iron-clad tough laws on eligibility, caps, transparency and accountability.

Corrupted

Because Reform is a new establishment, an elite all of its own, a get-rich-quick grab for a wealthy few at the expense of the many who have been falsely sold an insurgency by calculating and cynical Trumpist politicians posing as outsiders to become insiders.

We require urgent debate and swift action or British politics will be corrupted by bitcoin speculators seeking a fresh prize after securing the US.

Should state funding be considered in order for political parties to be pulled out of the hands of the mega bucks brigade?

I'm personally unsure – imagine the public backlash over taxpayers' money for unpopular parties, a campaign no doubt orchestrated by the likes of crypto Reform – but we already rightly pay MPs, cover legitimate expenses and fund constituency teams to help the electorate.

Opposition parties once they've won seats are also funded by so-called Short Money for research and employing staff to compete with parties in power, benefiting from special advisers and civil service support.

In the 2025-26 Parliament, a House of Commons Library analysis stated, totals under a formula based on votes and seats allocated the SDLP £135,642.29, Plaid Cymru £139,949.29, DUP £158,130.01, SNP £382,182.95, Greens £406,926.87, Reform UK £406,926.87, Liberal Democrats £2,522,049.20 and Conservatives £5,518,243.24.

So state funding political parties and outlawing influence-buying, if that's the path the UK went down to save democracy from foreign billionaires, wouldn't breach a mythical no-taxpayers' cash principle.

And it might prove a relatively small amount well spent.



LOBBYING: Baroness Mone pushed case for PPE Medpro

BOMBSHELL EMAIL REVEALS

EXCLUSIVE by NICK SOMMERLAD

A TOP civil servant running the Tory government's infamous VIP lane during the pandemic secretly warned that it was disrupting efforts to source PPE and could end up costing the taxpayer more money.

That prophetic advice appeared to go unheeded – billions were spent through the VIP lane, including £1billion on stock that was later deemed "not fit for purpose".

But alarm bells were ringing before many of those contracts were signed.

We have found a bombshell email among more than 10,000 documents released by

the UK Covid-19 Inquiry which reveals deep misgivings among those at the heart of the Tories' frantic response to the rising deaths.

The Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice campaign told us it was "further evidence that the then Conservative government's VIP lane put self-interest and profiteering ahead of getting PPE to frontline workers and care staff".

The Cabinet Office's Max Cairnduff was drafted in to lead the newly established "High Priority Lane" – also known as the VIP lane – throughout April 2020 when, he told the inquiry, he was "in charge of the day to day running of it". He says the lane was set up to deal with the "noise" coming

from senior ministers, MPs and others who wanted "higher level contact" after forwarding PPE offers.

In a candid and previously unpublished email to his line manager running the PPE buying team, sent three weeks into the role, Mr Cairnduff said he believed "the China team has the best routes to high volume, sensibly priced PPE offers" – and that the civil servants there should be given the powers and resources to close deals quickly.

He added: "The VIP Cell and the wider sourcing Cells are mostly dealing with intermediaries, many of whom are sourcing from the same factories our China team are already in contract with. There is clear risk of

TORY VIP LANE COST BILLIONS

disrupting our already-contracted supply and outbidding ourselves for supply we were already due to receive."

Consequences

Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice UK told Babelfish: "Our members know first-hand the consequences of the failure to deliver PPE quickly and efficiently. Our family members paid the price.

"We look forward to the Covid Inquiry publishing its verdict on 14 July, and hope it finally exposes the full truth."

A list of covid-era PPE deals drawn up by the Cabinet Office shows the "China

Buy" team negotiated 59 contracts worth £1.4bn with no reported problems. Meanwhile the VIP lane signed 117 contracts worth £4.2bn, with numerous issues that cost the taxpayer huge sums.

Some £1bn of PPE was bought from 25 suppliers through the VIP lane which was later deemed not fit for purpose, according to Spotlight On Corruption.

In all, Transparency International found "at least 28 contracts worth £4.1bn went to those with known political connections to the party of government".

Crony deals included two for gowns and facemasks worth £203m to newly

formed PPE Medpro Limited, which had no record of supplying PPE, after lobbying by Tory peer Baroness Mone.

It later emerged more than £60m in profits went to Mone and husband Doug Barrowman, a businessman living on the Isle of Man.

Two companies linked to Mr Barrowman donated more than £200,000 to the Conservatives from 2017 to 2020.

The gowns were never used as tests found them to be non-sterile. PPE Medpro went bust last year owing the Department of Health £148m.

Mone and Barrowman deny all wrongdoing.

50 WAYS TO LEAVE

IF private donations are to be banned, the replacement must be credible, fair, and resistant to partisan manipulation, according to the economy and democracy analysts the Autonomy Institute. They propose a dual-channel model that balances democratic responsiveness with institutional stability, and distributes funds to all qualifying parties through two complementary mechanisms. Beyond this, capped membership fees are still permissible. Here, we set out their proposals...

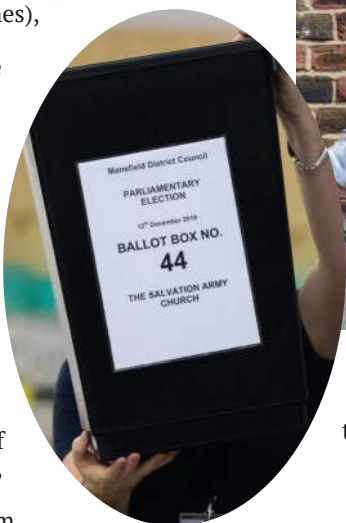
THE DEMOCRATIC MULTIPLIER: A PARTY-MEMBERSHIP BASED SYSTEM

EVERY political party's annual budget is set by a single, transparent formula: its number of paid-up members, multiplied by £50, paid by the state.

To qualify, a party must hold at least one seat in the House of Commons, so that public money follows demonstrated electoral support.

At today's membership levels, the total cost to the taxpayer would be around £50million a year. Every party's budget would reflect the genuine size of its engaged and democratic membership: the bigger the number of members, the bigger the budget.

The only legitimate way to grow a party's resources is to grow its democratic base. Equally, if an individual wants to improve a particular party's finances (and fortunes), then they have an incentive to become a member – thus likely increasing democratic engagement. It will obviously have to be mandated that there are relatively short (or nonexistent) notice periods should individuals wish to revoke their membership of any particular party, so as to prevent any gaming of the system.



three political parties would currently miss the £3m threshold, on the basis of their membership size.

KEEPING MEMBERSHIP FEES IN THE MIX

THIS system does not exclude political party membership subscriptions but puts strong caps on them.

Mandated caps are essential so as to not allow huge subscription price brackets (which would be a way around a strict 'donations' ban). Given that the party will already receive £50 per member as part of this system, membership fees should be capped at £10 per month (most are currently well under this).

GOVERNANCE AND BUDGET

THE Crown Estate generates over £1billion per year of public revenue – 12% of which currently funds the monarchy.

Based on the most recent figures, reducing that share to 6%, with the difference ringfenced as a Democracy Fund, would allow the system to cover the full cost of a public party funding scheme of between £50-£70million, with a surplus to cover

future rising costs (due to increased party memberships) and the backstop.

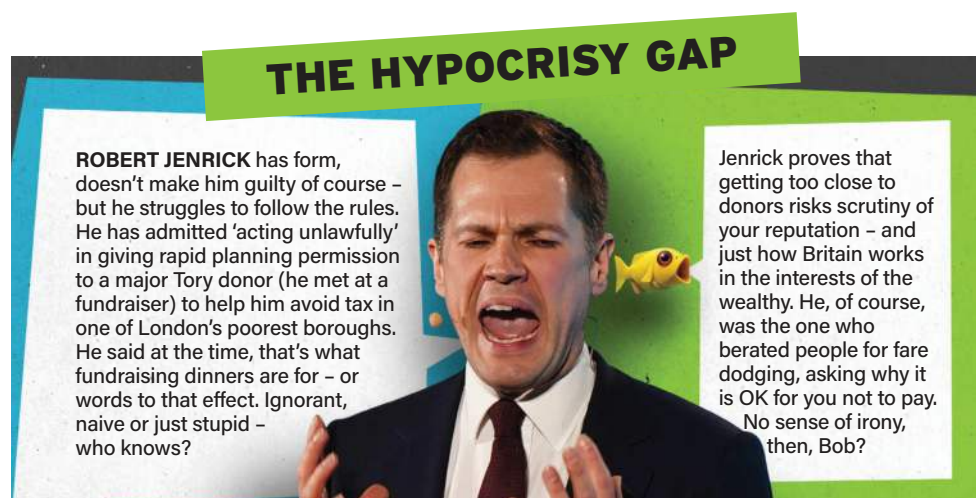
The Sovereign Grant would remain comfortably above its historical level, the legislation would be a single short amendment to existing law, and the proposal carries a strong justification, namely that the Crown Estate has belonged to the nation, not the monarch personally, since 1760.

The Democracy Fund would be overseen

by a reformed Electoral Commission with enhanced independence and enforcement powers, including the authority to audit party spending and impose meaningful sanctions.

The budget could sit within the Cabinet Office.

The above assumes that Short Money, Cranborne Money, Policy Development Grants, devolved-parliament assistance are all still separately in place.



THE BACKSTOP: A PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY FUND

A PURELY member-based model risks entrenching large parties at the expense of smaller ones and risks some parties failing. To counter this, a "participatory democracy fund" would provide a backstop amount of money should any qualifying party not receive a minimum amount.

This baseline grant, which would vary depending on how much of a shortfall there is, ensures that even smaller parties have sufficient resources to participate meaningfully in democratic life.

We propose a minimum of £3million per year for each qualifying party.

The cost of financing this minimum standard is hard to estimate, but it is likely that few parliamentary parties would require the use of the fund due to the member-based financing system.

On our calculations of current data, only

...YOUR DONOR



BY DR WILL STRONGE
AUTONOMY INSTITUTE
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

WITH private money pouring into British democracy, it's no wonder the public has stopped believing in it.

We have a political funding model that allows private wealth to purchase access, influence and, most likely, policy.

At the Autonomy Institute we have built the most comprehensive picture yet assembled of who funds UK political parties, how much they give and what they appear to get in return. This research all points in the same direction: the era of private funding must end.

As political theorist Samuel Bagg notes, democracy relies on preventing the capture of our governing institutions by elite groups. Yet under the present rules, wealthy individuals and corporations can pour vast sums into politics.

Our research has documented 373 companies that sit on both sides of this exchange: donating to parties while receiving public contracts. For every £1 these "giver and taker" firms have donated since 2000, over £1,294 of public funds has flowed back to them in the form of government contracts. This is not a coincidence but rather a structural incentive baked into the system.

Our most recent analysis showed that Labour's business donations surged by 1,707% between the 2019 and 2024 pre-election periods, rising from under £1million to over £14million.

Elimination

But it is not a problem confined to just one party: corporate funding's share of all pre-election finance reached 29% in 2024, the highest level this century. The gravitational pull of private money is distorting both Labour and the Conservatives – not to mention Reform UK's rocketing income from its multimillionaire friends.

Tinkering with the transparency requirements is no longer sufficient. What is needed is a clean break: the elimination of private donations to political parties, replaced by a fair and transparent system of public funding.

Slashing the financial incentive would do three key things: it would dampen, or destroy, any informal agreements between donors and political parties, breaking the links of corruption; it would force parties to broaden their appeal in order to accrue a wider base of paid members; and most importantly it would be a clear signal to the public that their politicians are no longer being bought off.

A predictable objection to public funding is that it is politically unviable: the public will never accept "taxpayers' money going to politicians". This objection deserves serious engagement but, ultimately, it does not hold water.

Firstly, the framing is essential. Public opposition to "giving taxpayers' money to politicians" is understandable. But



WHAT THE RESEARCH REVEALED

AUTONOMY'S programme of work on political donations, spanning three major publications since 2024, has produced a body of evidence that is now unmatched in UK political finance research. Our landmark Politics for Sale report analysed 21 years of Electoral Commission data, cross-referenced with Companies House and Parliamentary records.

It revealed that the Conservative Party received over £465million in donations across the period, that highly regulated industries, finance, gambling, fossil fuels and construction were disproportionately represented among donors, and that 52% of major business donations came from large private companies.

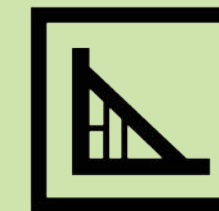
Our Givers and Takers investigation from 2025 then exposed the donor-contractor nexus at the heart of government, identifying 373 companies that both donated to parties and received public contracts. Nearly 10% of these firms won large government

contracts within two years of donating to the party that subsequently held power. Twenty-nine companies donated approximately £11million to the Conservatives and received £2.3billion in contracts during their time in office. The pattern has already begun to replicate under Labour: eight corporations donating over £580,000 received contracts worth £138million within the government's first year.

Finally, Labour, the Party of Capital? documented how Labour's fundraising base has been structurally transformed, with business donations rising from 2.1% of pre-election finances in 2019 to 22.3% in 2024.

This is not merely a Labour story: it demonstrates that the problem is systemic rather than partisan.

Any party that governs will face the same gravitational pull toward corporate money. The only durable solution is to strictly limit the amount of private money in the system entirely.



Autonomy Institute

when the same proposition is framed as "removing the ability of corporations and wealthy individuals to buy political influence," public support would be likely to flip dramatically.

France's ban on corporate donations, for instance, was driven by a series of corporate corruption cases.

The partial public funding mechanism was presented not as a gift to politicians but as the price of getting private money out. Thus, the political viability of public funding depends entirely on whether it is presented as the cost of cleaning up politics or as a subsidy for politicians.

Secondly, this is not a radical experiment: banning donations is established practice in countries the British public would recognise as democratic peers.

If private donations are to be banned,

the replacement must be credible, fair, and resistant to partisan manipulation. I propose a dual-channel model balancing democratic engagement with baseline economic security for the party system.

At the heart of the proposal is a strikingly simple idea: tie every party's annual budget to the size of its democratic membership.

The state would pay £50 a year for each paid-up member of any party holding at least one Commons seat – a formula that would provide a decent budget for today's politics, and one that rewards parties for doing the unglamorous work of persuading real people to sign up.

To stop this from quietly hollowing out smaller parties, a "participatory democracy fund" would sit behind it as a backstop, guaranteeing every qualifying party a floor of £3million a year so that

no party with a parliamentary foothold is starved out of meaningful political life. And, crucially, membership subscriptions would also remain in place, but capped at a £10 monthly maximum.

This ensures that the lifeblood of party finance flows from a broad democratic base rather than from a handful of well-connected cheque-writers.

At today's membership levels, this model would cost the taxpayer around just over £50million annually, which could be paid for from a ringfenced fund drawn from the Crown Estate.

This is an incredibly low price to pay for cleaner, more engaged politics – we would shift the balance of power drastically overnight, from a small elite to a wider electorate whose political convictions now carry new weight.

FROM KING TO

Reduce the Sovereign Grant to wrest politics

THERE is another, more radical, idea that would ensure the democratic power in Britain remains with the people and not with the privileged, big money donors.

Tapping into the King's vast finances, by moderately reducing the Sovereign Grant paid to working royals from the Crown Estate, would generate enough income to secure political funding and create a fairer playing field for all.

And no, this isn't a republican suggestion to undermine the monarchy, there are solid economic and social reasons to consider it.

Research by economy and democracy analysts the Autonomy Institute has examined the £1.1billion per year of public revenue generated by the Crown Estate, of which 12% goes to fund the monarchy.

Its report has concluded that reducing the royal family's share to 6%, with the difference ringfenced as a Democracy Fund, would cover the full cost of the proposed public party funding scheme of £50million to £70million per year.

The Sovereign Grant would remain comfortably above its historical level, the legislation would be a single short amendment to existing law, and the proposal carries a strong moral justification, namely that the Crown Estate has belonged to the nation, not the monarch personally, for more than 250 years.

Monarch

When King George III ascended to the throne in 1760, he brought with him a landmark law – the surrender of the monarch's revenue from his vast hereditary lands to parliament.

The income from the woodlands, lakes, towns and seabeds was given over, to be spent on the public good, in return for a fixed annual income.

That deal remained in various forms until 2012 when the Sovereign Grant replaced it, but the principle of the money working in the interests of the people remains.

The working members of the royal family, through the monarch, now receive a percentage of the income from the £1.1billion annual revenue, determined by parliament.

King Charles cannot sell the lands and they are managed independently.

The net surplus generated by the estate has been increased by recent offshore wind leasing rounds and, on 2023/24 figures, the



THE SANITY OF KING GEORGE: He gave up the monarch's revenue from vast hereditary lands for an income

LAND OWNER: Charles on a country stroll and, inset, Regents Street in London is part of the Crown Estate



reduction to a 6% share would unlock £66million a year. That would support a public party funding scheme of the scale being considered in this proposal without any new tax or any new draw on the Consolidated Fund.

The grant for 2025 to 2026 stands at approximately £132million.

Every five years the fixed percentage is reviewed by the Royal Trustees, namely the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the Keeper of the Privy Purse.

The rate stood at 25% during the Buckingham Palace reservicing programme.

For the change to take effect, a short amendment to the Sovereign Grant Act 2011 is required, principally to sections 1 and 6. The bill would carry financial privilege as a money bill, meaning the House of Lords would not have powers to block it.

Amendment

The next scheduled five-year review of the percentage falls in the 2026 to 2027 cycle, providing a natural legislative window. The amendment could take one of three forms.

Option one is for the percentage paid to

the Sovereign Grant to be reduced, which is the solution the Autonomy Institute has described above. Setting the rate at 6% of Crown Estate net surplus would, on current figures, free roughly £66million per year. If it were set at 8% it would free approximately £44million, closely matching the cost of a £1 per voter scheme.

Even at the lower rate, the Sovereign Grant would remain higher in real terms than the Civil List ever was.

A second option is to replace the percentage with a fixed sum, indexed for inflation. This is essentially the pre-2011 Civil List model. It is politically easier to defend because it caps royal funding rather than appearing to reduce

COUNTRY

from the grasp of 'big money'



£465m

Amount of donations the Conservative Party received in 21 years, with highly regulated industries, finance, gambling, fossil fuels and construction disproportionately represented.



52%

Proportion of major business donations to the Tories that came from large private companies.



373

The number of companies that donated to parties and also received lucrative public contracts.



10%

The percentage of those 373 companies that won large government contracts within just two years of donating to a party that subsequently held power.



£2.3billion

The value of contracts won by 29 companies who donated £11million to the Conservatives during their time in office.



£138million

The value of contracts won by eight corporations donating £580,000 to Labour within their first year in power.



22.3%

The percentage of Labour's pre-election donations made up by businesses in 2024 – up from 2.1% in 2019.

Republicanism

it year-on-year, and the redirected amount is the difference between the cap and the current trajectory.

The third option is hypothecation. A new clause in the Act would divert a defined slice of Crown Estate net surplus directly into a new fund, for example a Democracy Fund administered by the Electoral Commission, before the Sovereign Grant is calculated.

This avoids any direct cut to royal income and presents the change as a rebalancing of how Crown Estate revenue is allocated, rather than a reduction in what the monarch receives.

There is a risk that any change to

monarchy funding would be read by parts of the press as a republican move.

The hypothecation framing, in which Crown Estate revenue is rebalanced rather than royal income reduced, is the strongest defence.

Polling on Sovereign Grant reform has generally been more favourable than polling on republicanism itself, suggesting the two questions should be kept separate in public messaging.

Second, the redirected amount is volatile because it tracks Crown Estate

profits two years in arrears. A Democracy Fund relying on this needs either a smoothing mechanism, such as a three-year rolling average, or a statutory floor underwritten from the Consolidated Fund. The existing Sovereign Grant Act already contains a cash floor to prevent the Grant falling year-on-year, and any bill would need to modify that floor.

The income from the Crown Estate is set aside for the public good. If considered in this light it becomes a patriotic idea – what could be more in the interests of the people than safe-guarding our democracy from a few wealthy individuals?

A world of good ideas

OTHER countries have already banned or severely restricted corporate and private donations to political parties, replacing them with public funding models that have proven both workable and popular.

FRANCE

Banned corporate donations outright in 1995. Today, only citizens and residents may contribute, capped at €7,500 per year and public financing forms the majority of party funding.



CANADA

Prohibited corporate and trade union donations entirely in 2006. Individual contributions are capped at CAD\$1,725 per year (£930). Parties rely primarily on individual donations and election expense reimbursements of up to 50%.



BELGIUM

Caps individual donations at €500 (£430) and provides extensive public funding to the parties.



PORTUGAL

Calculates donation limits per person based on minimum wage, and bans donations from private firms, whether domestic or foreign.



GERMANY

No outright ban but strict donation caps with full transparency. Substantial state funding is allocated proportional to votes received and membership dues raised.



Quid pro quo

REGISTER to vote and get £1 of public funds to allocate to a political party of your choice.

That's another scheme considered by the Autonomy Institute to ensure parties are funded according to their popularity and which would encourage politicians to put in the work to appeal to a wide supporter base.

Depending on the definition of an "eligible voter" the proposal could raise £28-£50million a year across the parties.

If defined as all registered voters, as opposed to those who actually voted at the last election, it would result in a £48.2m spending pot.

But if voters must actively assign their £1 on an opt-in basis, then given the 2024 general election turnout of 59.7%, the cost to the government would be capped at around £28.7m.

A universal assignment of £1 per voter approach is an alternative, with the "leftover" that has not been nominated by individuals going to the Treasury. The maximum resulting £48.2m amounts to 0.004% of the total £1.23trillion annual government spending.

The cost of the digital set up and maintenance of this scheme would need to be factored in.



END OF THE CHEQUE, MATE!



BY PAUL NOWAK
GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE TUC

CLEANING up our politics is not a side issue. It is essential to rebuilding trust and defending democracy in the UK.

People can see the system is not working as it should. Decisions affecting millions are too often shaped by money, influence and access rather than the public interest.

If we want a healthier democracy, we have to be serious about transparency, accountability and fairness – starting with who funds political power.

That is why the TUC has launched Unity Works, a major new initiative to bring workers and communities together around a positive vision for the economy and to confront the self-interested forces that are undermining our democracy.

Unity Works will campaign for fair pay, decent rights at work, strong public services and a tax system that works for everyone. But it will also take on something just as urgent: cleaning up a political system that too often feels captured by vested interests.

That starts with following the money. The government was right last month to ban political donations made through cryptocurrency. Unlike more conventional forms of funding, crypto makes it far harder to trace where money originates – or whose interests lie behind it.

Embraced

It opens the door to hidden influence – including from overseas – with minimal transparency and next to no accountability.

That risk is already real. Reform has accepted cryptocurrency donations, following the example set by Donald Trump who has embraced crypto funding and even launched his own digital currency ventures.

This is a recipe for murkiness and mistrust, denying the public a clear view of who is bankrolling political power.

But cryptocurrency is only one part of a much bigger problem.

Our political system is increasingly shaped by extreme wealth. A small number of individuals now wield outsized influence over decisions that affect millions of people – without any meaningful democratic consent.

We can see this most starkly in the scale of big-money donations flooding into politics. Last year Reform received a record £12million from Thailand-based crypto investor Christopher Harborne – the largest political donation ever made to a UK party by a living individual.

Harborne also gave £1million to Boris Johnson's private office and is part of a broader pattern in which wealthy backers continue to prop up political figures long after the public has paid the price for their failures. And this concentration of power goes far beyond party funding.

Much of the UK's media landscape is dominated by a small number of billionaires who shape debate and public understanding through the lens of their own interests.

Online tech platforms owned by figures

How Labour can reclaim politics with a radical act...being honest



BY LIAM BYRNE
LABOUR MP

I SPEND a lot of time on doorsteps. Talking to voters at their homes, in their streets, is where you learn everything about politics.

Reading the leaflets posted through doors during this last campaign, one thing becomes obvious. Reform's story always begins with a wound. They name an enemy. They cast themselves as the only authentic alternative. And they are eating into the coalition that progressives need to hold together to keep the populist right out of power.

The question is not whether they are doing this effectively. They are. The question is whether Labour is willing to learn from it honestly – and then do better.

Let me be plain about what Reform does well, because we won't beat them by dismissing them.

Farage's literature doesn't open with a policy. It opens with a feeling. "Britain is broken. Nothing works as it should any more." The language is personal, colloquial, accusatory.

My research, set out in *Why Populists Are Winning – And How to Beat Them*, found the same fingerprint across the western world: collective grievance, combat verbs, a swing between golden past and urgent present, and a

conversational warmth that signals "I'm one of you." The Farage letter hits every marker.

But here is Reform's fatal weakness. Their offer is entirely subtractive. Cut, stop, restore, end. There is no vision of a Britain that is actually better. The economics collapse under scrutiny. The strongman at the centre raises an obvious question: movement or personality cult?

Yet Reform's message cuts through because of the sheer scale of momentum behind it. My research has mapped, for the first time, the financial architecture of Britain's populist right – more than £170million, traced to just a handful of billionaires, flowing through a media-political complex built in plain sight over five years to shape what British people see, hear, and ultimately believe.

More than £130m can be traced to just four individuals or entities. That money isn't charity. It is purchasing power over the political conversation and it is being used, deliberately and strategically, to manipulate what British people think and feel about their country.

That is why the recent amendments to the Representation of the People Bill, putting a cap on foreign donations and banning cryptocurrency in political funding, are not procedural reforms – they are acts of democratic self-defence. What must Labour do next? It must escape our current position: marooned between the anger captured by Reform and the hope captured by the Greens.

Language

Neither the vessel for fury nor the carrier of optimism, but a managerial operation that speaks in the language of process while Reform speaks in the language of feeling.

We can do better. Name the problems plain. Name the selfish minority making ordinary lives harder – the firms rigging the marketplace, the landlords breaking the rules, the energy companies posting record profits while families cut the heating.

Make the battle with them visible. Show the work. Not a list of achievements. Specific, verifiable proof that something has changed.

Strong Labour's offer is harder and more honest than anything Reform or the Greens will ever offer. And in an age of magical thinking, honesty is a radical act. That is how we reclaim politics. Not by out-Reforming Reform. By trusting people with the truth.



CAMPAIGN: Labour supporters, left, and, above, research by Liam Byrne

such as Elon Musk have become engines of division, amplifying misinformation and abuse because it drives engagement and profit. Taken together this growing dominance of wealth across politics, media and technology is corrosive to democracy.

If we are serious about restoring trust in our political institutions, transparency has to come first. Banning cryptocurrency donations

is a step in the right direction but it cannot be the end of the story.

We also need to curb the influence of big money in politics, tackle media monopolies and properly regulate social media platforms.

These are not fringe demands. They reflect widespread public concern.

Polling published by the TUC shows that three-quarters of people believe large donors

to political parties have too much influence over UK politics – with just 1% thinking they have too little.

Two-thirds say multinational companies exert too much influence while only 2% believe they have too little.

Rebuilding faith in democracy means confronting entrenched power – not quietly cashing its cheques.



BY LUCY POWELL
LABOUR PARTY DEPUTY LEADER

NIGEL FARAGE is importing all the worst populist tactics which have undermined democracy elsewhere to Britain.

Reform's exploitation of online algorithms on social media sites is well documented, as is their use of bots and troll farms to amplify support.

Farage is mired in controversy about his support for and use of crypto currencies, a murky subject which raises big questions about where Reform's money is coming from.

This isn't just about the £5million gift from a Thai-based crypto billionaire, but the huge sums he has also donated to Reform which fund their powerful online campaigns.

Foreign interference, foreign money, and foreign influence in elections need to stop.

There's long been concern about the spread of dis and misinformation online, influencing voters, and undermining elections. Added to this is the use of AI to create deepfakes.

The very foundations of our democracy – free and fair elections – are at stake.

That's why we came into government promising to strengthen our electoral system against these threats through tightening campaign finance and donation laws.

Our Representation of the People Bill will bring in stricter rules on who can donate, including requirements that companies demonstrate genuine UK activity and ownership by UK electors.

Donations

We are also capping donations from overseas voters – set at £100,000 annually—and closing loopholes that previously allowed foreign-linked money to enter UK politics through shell companies.

We need an electoral system fit for the digital age. This Bill is a first step.

Cryptocurrency donations are also rightly in our sights because, by design, they can obscure the origin of funding, allowing donors to bypass transparency laws, making it easier to undermine bans on overseas contributions.

The independent Rycroft Review recognised the threat they pose to our democratic integrity.

So, it's right that we're taking strong action to effectively introduce a ban on crypto donations.

But we should go further too to regulate social media and tackle the scourge of dis and mis information which is ripping communities apart and undermining us all.

In the fast-paced world we live in, with new technology emerging at breakneck pace, the integrity of our electoral system is a watching brief.

Labour has and always will be the party of ordinary people, taking on the vested interests, the powerful and those with wealth to make sure our country works for the many not the few.

Making sure we strengthen the foundations of our democracy, so they are fit for the 21st century and the new challenges we face is a new front in our founding calling.

Farage a threat to Britain's very core

Low, hard cap is way to stop mega-donors

BY OLLY BUSTON,
DIRECTOR OF CLEAN UP WESTMINSTER

MONEY doesn't talk, it screams. And right now, when it comes to our democracy, the impact is deafening.

The man with the biggest megaphone is Thai-based crypto billionaire Christopher Harborne. His £12million in donations to Reform last year were one-fifth of all political donations. One man who owns a fifth of our democracy.

Nigel Farage says he doesn't ask for anything in return, but can it really be a total coincidence that the Reform leader has become so fiercely pro-crypto?

This is not just a Reform problem. The extent to which the Tory governments of recent years kowtowed to the rich and powerful became almost farcical. In 2014, the wife of former Russian deputy finance minister, oligarch Vladimir Chernukhin, paid £160,000 to play tennis with Boris Johnson, presumably not to improve her backhand. The Conservative Party also accepted £2.5million in donations from property developers who build blocks of flats covered in cladding, after the catastrophic Grenfell Tower fire.

Vulnerable

And progressive people (of which I guess I'm one) often have a blind spot. We think that because we are trying to do good things, we are somehow immune to the influence of money and power.

Unfortunately this isn't true. Power does corrupt. We do-gooders are human too. And we are no less vulnerable. We like free tickets. We like free clothes. A report by think-tank Autonomy Institute identified companies that have recently donated to Labour and were awarded contracts worth almost £138million.

Trump's America shows just how bad things can get when money takes over every aspect of politics. We are on that slippery slope and we need to get off fast.

This could be an incredible legacy for Keir Starmer. It fits with his sense of integrity and his own commitment to cleaning up politics. But he is on the verge of screwing it up by failing



Starmer is on the verge of screwing it up

SLIPPERY SLOPE: Trump's friendship with Farage is a warning of what could be to come. Photograph: @Nigel_Farage/twitter

to understand how money works; by lacking the boldness to really do the job properly; and by being too cute when it comes to Labour's own perceived (not real) self-interest.

Labour is committed to introducing a cap on foreign donations of £100,000 and a moratorium on crypto donations. But this shows a fundamental misunderstanding of global finance.

These mega-donors are world champions at shifting money around. In response to these policies Christopher Harborne brazenly told the Telegraph "Fine, in that case I'll give even more money." Ben Delo, another Reform mega-donor who is based in Hong Kong, said he would just move back to the UK for

a bit to keep the cash flowing. We need to clean up Westminster. There is only one solution: a low and hard cap on all political donations. Without it, the system will continue to reward those with the deepest pockets, not the strongest arguments. It's time to deliver.

A ban on foreign and crypto donations are both easy for mega-donors to swerve. Crypto is easily turned into cash.

Some MPs have proposed a £1m cap. This new polling suggests a cap at such an astronomically high level would be met with a very confused response from the public who favour a cap 100 times smaller. Let's not make democracy a millionaires' club. www.CleanUpWestminster.org

THE HYPOCRISY GAP

RICHARD TICE once had strong views on interference in British politics. As co-chair of the post-Brexit Leave Means Leave group, he objected to billionaire philanthropist George Soros helping fund the anti-Brexit Best for Britain campaign saying: "He doesn't live here, he doesn't pay taxes here. What right has he got to interfere with our democracy and try and overthrow the government?"

Today, Tice appears to have no such concerns, with nearly two-thirds of Reform donors last year attributed to foreign-based sources. He also welcomed a potential \$100million from Elon Musk, saying: "If Mr Musk can legally donate... we would be delighted!"



D-Day for democracy



BY SIMON KUPER
BRITISH AUTHOR AND JOURNALIST

SOMETIMES the correct policy seems obvious, yet the government has good reason for sticking with something worse.

That's the way it is with the idea of capping British political donations at, say, £1,000 per person (close to Canada's level). The reform would stop a few rich men in London from effectively buying shares in parties.

It might gradually restore some of the shattered British trust in politics. But first you would have to explain to angry Britons that henceforth they will be paying perhaps £2 a year each to fund those hated parties.

As the Lib Dem MP Martin Horwood reflected in 2011: "In the current context, I do not fancy particularly going on to the doorstep and explaining to people that their libraries are shutting and their daycare is being closed down and we may not be able to put as much on housing benefit as we used to, but good news; do not worry, we are giving more money to political parties. I think I might get a punch in the face."

Today, anyone suggesting public funding of parties might get two punches. Much easier to let those rich men pay. They're happy to do it. Nonetheless, for several reasons, this is the moment for the government to cap donations. It could be the last chance for a long time.

Charlatan

Reason number one for doing it is that trust in politics has collapsed to the point of crisis. That trust was never huge. British people have always been suspicious of politicians.

Even in 1944, when the country was run by men who had volunteered for the front in the First World War, and who were working day and night under German V2s, 35% of Britons told Gallup pollsters that politicians were "out for themselves".

By 2021, in a poll by the Institute for Public Policy Research, the proportion who thought politicians were "out for themselves" reached 63%, the highest on record. By December 2023, in a poll by We Think for Byline Times asking specifically about politicians in Westminster, it hit 70%. Various other pollsters have also found trust in politics near all-time lows.

British voters could now be tempted by a Trumpian charlatan who promises to "drain the swamp". Already, they are unwilling to trust politicians with a mission as expensive and complex as, say, the energy transition. Why wouldn't ministers just use it to funnel contracts to mates and donors? After all, that's what they did in a national life-and-death moment with the Covid VIP lane.

Reason number two to cap donations is that, with the world having become a much more dangerous place, these donations are now a national security problem. It's simple for foreigners to give to British parties. For instance, they can do it through companies they own in the UK. And buying influence

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OUT OF CONTROL:
The cash raining down on Westminster must be restricted in the interests of democracy

here is cheap. Look at Jeffrey Epstein's email exchange with Donald Trump's occasional adviser Steve Bannon about British far-right activist Tommy Robinson.

"Backbone of England", writes Bannon, implying irony through quotation marks. "That's why the pound so low," replies Epstein. "Cheap @ any price," agrees Bannon.

Whereas US politics has a "big money problem", in the UK the money is small.

Total spending by all parties in the 2024 general election was £94.5million, a British record. Nigel Farage said in 2024 that Elon Musk was considering donating to Reform UK. A figure of \$100million was mentioned – peanuts for Musk, but equivalent to nearly 80% of the total election spending. Musk hasn't

given to Reform yet, but the mere hope of his money surely encourages far-right parties to align with his views.

Plenty of other foreigners are keen to buy stakes in British politics. There are the London-based Russian donors, many with ties to Putin's regime, who supported the

Conservative Party so generously before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 – and some even since then. Chinese money has started flowing into Westminster. And several of Labour's biggest donors are also backers of Labour Friends of Israel, notes the political scientist Patrick Dunleavy.

Reason number three for a cap is that we now have strong evidence showing a switch to public funding of parties would probably save

taxpayers a fortune. The Covid VIP lane, through which the government handed contracts for medical equipment to some useless companies run by Tory donors, wasted billions. This happened because donors had bought access to ministers. In short, rich people captured a part of the state – a situation we

associate with faraway countries such as South Africa or Russia.

And the final reason to cap donations now? Labour has a selfish incentive to do so. Since the party is losing popularity with donors, who expect it to be ejected at the next election, it would benefit from a cap.

Although Labour took fortunes in donations when steaming to power before 2024, it will probably never become the default party for rich donors. Even in 2023, with Labour the obvious government-in-waiting, the Tories often out-raised it.

True, the short-term temptation in power is to take all the dosh that's on offer, but Labour's longer-term self-interest is to limit political spending. And Labour has promised to do so. Its election manifesto in 2024 pledged to "protect democracy by strengthening the rules around donations to political parties".

Loopholes

The Representation of the People Bill, now before parliament, does propose closing some loopholes that let in foreign and/or dodgy donors. But it leaves other loopholes open. It needs to go further and cap donations.

An eloquent prime minister could persuade voters that such a proposal is an anti-corruption measure. Passing the bill would be a rare achievement of this government – much cheaper and quicker to do than, say, reviving public services.

And if Labour neglect the problem, don't expect Prime Minister Nigel Farage to fix it.

“ The mere hope of Musk's money encourages the far-right to align with his views