

Consumer Choice Center

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The Consumer Choice Center (CCC) is a US lobby organisation based in Washington DC. It was set up as not-for-profit in February 2017, and approved for tax exempt status in 2019, on the basis of it being a social welfare organisation.¹ It has offices in the United States, Canada and the European Union (EU).² As of March 2022 it had not filed any financial returns with the US authorities.¹

CCC has stated that it lobbies against “paternalistic” government regulations,³ covering “food and agriculture policies, fat/sugar tax, soda tax, food labelling, health care and harm reduction, trade initiatives (TTIP /TTP), transportation and aviation regulations”.⁴ It describes itself as a “consumer advocacy group” and a “grassroots movement”⁵ which “represents consumers in over 100 countries”.⁶

Background

CCC’s parent organisation is Students For Liberty (SFL),⁷ an American libertarian organisation linked to billionaires Charles and David Koch.⁸ CCC stated in its 2018 annual report that it was a partner of the [Atlas Network](#).⁹

In 2017, SFL launched CCC with a budget of \$210,296.¹⁰ CCC describes itself as “totally open” to corporate donations.¹¹

On the EU transparency register, CCC declared total income of close to €7.8 million in its first two years of operation, in the form of donations from unspecified sources.^{12 13} In 2019 this fell to around €1,000,000.^{14 15} Its declaration for 2021, published in March 2022, declared no funding.⁴

The organisation states that it has received financial support from consumer goods, energy, manufacturing, digital, healthcare, cryptocurrency and fin-tech industries.¹⁶ It has also received funding from the [Atlas Network](#) (and associated company the Atlas Project), the Geneva Network,¹⁷ and directly from transnational tobacco companies (see below).^{6 18}

According to CCC's own code of ethics, published on its website, its "campaigns, op-eds, and videos are not sent to supporters before they are released. Partners see our content and outputs at the same time as the general public."⁶ It does not detail what other input any supporters might have up to the point of release.

Staff

CCC's Managing Director is Frederik Roeder.^{19 20 21}

Other persons that work for, or have previously worked for the CCC:

- Adam Cleave, Senior Adviser (previously worked for [Imperial Tobacco](#));^{22 23}
- [Jeff Stier](#), Senior Fellow, [tobacco harm reduction](#) advocate.^{24 25}
- Bill Wirtz, Policy Analyst
- Luca Bertolletti, European Affairs Manager
- Yaël Ossowski, Deputy Director.²¹
- Maria Chaplia, Research Manager

Many CCC staff have previously held, or currently hold, roles within SFL.^{26 21}

Roeder, Bertolletti and Chaplia were registered EU lobbyists in 2017/18.¹³ Bertolletti is also a Director of a public relations company called B&K Agency.²⁷

LATAM Policy Fellow Antonella Marty is the Associate Director of the Center for Latin America at Atlas Network.^{21 28} As of March 2022, CCC also had Policy Fellows for South Africa, Nigeria, Taiwan and Indonesia.²¹

Connections with Governments

Peter Liese, a Member of the European Parliament (MEP), collaborates with the World Vapers Alliance, which was set up by CCC to lobby on e-cigarette regulation (see [below](#)).^{29 30}

CCC's website states that it is the 'secretariat' for a cross party group in the EU Parliament called "Innovation, Brands, and IP – The future of Europe group", also referred to as "MEPS4Innovation".^{29 31} Claiming over 30 members "representing most EU states", its work areas are listed as: "Digital;

Healthcare; Agriculture; Harm Reduction; Consumer Goods” (all of which are of potential interest to tobacco companies).³¹

In January 2022, Lord Wharton joined CCC as a Strategic Adviser.^{21 32} James Lord Wharton is a member of the UK House of Lords, was previously an adviser to Boris Johnson and, as of 2022, is Chair of the Office for Students. He lists CCC as one of his Directorships on the UK Government register of interests.³³

At the same time, Alexander Kvitashvili joined CCC as Public Health Advisor. An independent consultant to the World Health Organization, Kvitashvili was Minister of Healthcare of Ukraine (to 2016), and prior to that Minister of Health of Georgia.^{21 32}

Relationship with the Tobacco Industry

CCC has received funding from [Japan Tobacco International \(JTI\)](#), who co-funded its launch event,^{16 34} JTI was a member of CCC in 2017.^{35 36 6} Upon request, JTI declined to disclose what this membership entailed and how much financial support was linked to it.³⁷

In addition, CCC’s Frederik Roeder contributed to “Regulating Consumers?”, a *Euractiv* Special Report sponsored by JTI for €10,000.^{38 39}

In 2018, CCC stated that it had received funding from [Philip Morris International](#).¹⁶

Altria has donated an unspecified amount of money to CCC annually from 2018.^{40 41 42 43}

CCC stated on its website that it received funding from [British American Tobacco \(BAT\)](#) for support of CCC’s “tobacco harm reduction advocacy”.⁶ CCC did not specify when the money was received, although it appeared to be in 2019.⁴⁴ It was also unclear if BAT’s financial support was ongoing.¹⁸ See below for CCC’s outputs relating to e-cigarettes and [harm reduction](#).

For more on BAT’s commercial interests in this area see [Newer Nicotine and Tobacco Products: British American Tobacco](#).

Attempt to Discredit World Health Organisation (WHO) and IARC

In September 2018, in the run up to the meeting of the 8th Conference of the Parties (COP 8), CCC scheduled three strongly biased roundtables to discuss “WHO’s shortcomings in working towards better global public health and how the WHO actively blocks healthier technologies in the area of harm reduction”.⁴⁵ The events also condemned the WHO’s International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) assessment of the pesticide glyphosate as a probable human carcinogen. None of the invited speakers had public health qualifications.

London, 6 September 2018

Scheduled presentations at the London roundtable included:

- “Public Funding of Public Health Activists” by [Christopher Snowdon](#) from the [Institute of Economic Affairs](#) (IEA)
- “Too busy with the wrong Priorities: Does the WHO suffer from Mission Creep?”, by CCC’s Bill Wirtz
- “How the UK can become a leader in tobacco harm reduction”, Daniel Pryor from the [Adam Smith Institute](#)
- “Foreign Aid for Public Health and Clandestine Maneuvering sic: Insights from the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control”, by CCC’s Fred Roeder

Brussels, 10 September 2018

At the Brussels roundtable, the following presentations were on the agenda:

- “Too busy with the wrong Priorities: Does the WHO suffer from Mission Creep?”, by CCC’s Bill Wirtz
- “The WHO and The International Agency for Research and Cancer (IARC): How evidence based policies are sabotaged by those who ought enforce them”, by Professor David Zaruk, Odisee University College
- “Foreign Aid for Public Health and Clandestine Maneuvering sic: Insights from the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control”, by CCC’s Fred Roeder

Rome, 18 September 2018

The focus of the roundtable in Italy seemed to be on [E-cigarettes](#) and the product’s future in Italy. Listed external speakers were:

- Carolina Pellegrini (Istituto Nazionale dei Tumori di Milano)
- Daniele Capezzone (New Direction Italia)
- Alessandro Colucci (Camera dei Deputati)

Research with Twitter data by Bath TCRG highlighted the nature of CCC's activity around meeting of the 8th Conference of the Parties (COP 8), and those of other tobacco industry allies.⁴⁶

The researchers concluded that:

The nature of the activity on Twitter around COP8, including a substantial online presence by PMI executives and NGP advocates with links to organisations funded directly and indirectly by PMI, is highly consistent with PMI's 2014 corporate affairs strategy, which described engaging tobacco harm reduction advocates to 'amplify and leverage the debate on harm reduction' around events such as the COP.⁴⁶

After this CCC continued to direct its lobbying efforts to the promotion of e-cigarettes, which it frames as "harm reduction advocacy". It became more active from 2020, in the run up to COP 9, when it received further funding from BAT.

Lobbying for E-cigarettes

In June 2020, CCC called for the "liberalisation of vaping".⁴⁷ It also put out a statement arguing that the US State of Georgia's proposed tax on e-cigarettes would "harm poor consumers".⁴⁸

In October 2020, CCC published a report called "Vaping and the Gateway Myth"^{49 50} The report did not refer to CCC's funding from BAT. It was co-written an organisation called the "World Vapers Alliance" (WVA).

World Vapers' Alliance set up to lobby COP 9

The World Vapers Alliance (WVA) was initially presented as an independent partner organisation, for which CCC had provided an unspecified amount of "seed funding".⁵¹ WVA acknowledged the support of CCC on its website, which was set up in December 2019 and maintained by [Red Flag Consulting](#) (a lobbying company which has long had BAT as a client).^{52 53 54}

Investigations by *Le Monde* and the Investigative Desk showed that WVA was actively lobbying against the regulation of e-cigarettes before and during time of the meeting of the 9th [Conference of the Parties \(COP 9\)](#) in November 2021.⁴⁴ CCC subsequently published an article on its website

saying that it had, in fact, set up WVA.⁵⁵ It stated that WVA was a “a global movement to represent the voice of vapers”.⁵⁵ Videos on the WVA YouTube channel depicted the organisation’s activities before and during COP 9, including its “Back Vaping Beat Smoking” branded campaign van and its presence in Geneva (although COP was held virtually due to the Covid-19 pandemic).⁵⁶

According to an investigation by the *Daily Beast*, leaked e-mails and documents indicated that BAT was behind WVA’s campaign.²⁹ A response by Roeder, published on CCC’s website, dismissed the accusations, referring to “anonymous claims from disgruntled former subcontractors”.⁵⁷ BAT did not respond to the allegations of its involvement in an [astroturfing](#) campaign, other than to provide a statement saying that it supported organizations that share its goal of “tobacco harm reduction.”²⁹

After COP 9 the WVA continued to lobby for e-cigarettes. In 2022, the WVA’s website invited people to take action to “make vaping part of Europe’s plan to beat cancer” but did not list any members or contributors.⁵⁸ In February 2022, a video on its YouTube channel argued that proposed regulations in South Africa “would severely restrict vaping in the country and what impact they can have on consumers and on public health”.⁵⁹ South Africa is a growing market for e-cigarettes, including BAT’s products.

Lobbying on illicit trade around MOP 2

CCC also lobbies on illicit trade, including the [illicit trade](#) of tobacco products.^{60 61}

In November 2021, around the time of the second meeting of the Members of the Parties (MOP 2) to the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products, CCC organised a webinar on the topic.^{62 63} This was introduced by the Irish MEP Sean Kelly. Although CCC promoted this as a live event, Mr Kelly’s statement was pre-recorded and he did not take part in the discussion.⁶² The other speakers were from a Spanish business forum and a UK based brand consultancy.⁶³

CCC submitted a response to the EU consultation on tobacco taxation in 2021, citing the risk of illicit trade.^{4 64} Its submission stated that:

“Smoking should be seen as a matter of consumer choice and personal responsibility. Tobacco products should not see any further scrutiny”

Citing concern over illicit trade is a well-documented [industry argument against taxation](#).

Opposing intellectual property waiver on COVID 19 vaccines

CCC has opposed attempts by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to improve access to COVID-19 vaccines. WTO has considered temporarily waiving intellectual property rights relating to the prevention, containment or treatment of COVID-19, which would allow WTO member countries to manufacture COVID-19 vaccines to cope with demands.⁶⁵ CCC published an article in May 2021 criticising President Biden’s support of the waiver,⁶⁶ and another in June 2022 arguing that the “TRIPS waiver will cost us decades of progress”.⁶⁷ CCC has also advocated for Germany and Canada to oppose the waiver,^{68 69} and appears to have attempted to influence Members of the European Parliament on the subject, predominantly through its “Innovation, Brands and Intellectual Property- The Future of Europe” group.⁷⁰

Tobacco companies that are financially linked to CCC have significant investments in COVID-19 vaccine development. BAT announced in April 2020 that its subsidiary, Kentucky BioProcessing, is developing a COVID 19 vaccine, and has since launched a new company, KBio Holdings Limited, to accelerate this development.⁷¹ Philip Morris International is a major shareholder in Medicago, a Canadian biotechnology company whose COVID 19 vaccine was approved for use in Canada in February 2022.⁷²

The tobacco industry has a history of using intellectual property arguments to oppose new tobacco control regulations, such as the introduction of plain packaging and graphic health warnings.⁷³

For more information on tobacco industry COVID-19 vaccines visit the [Tobacco Company Investments in Pharmaceutical & NRT Products](#) page.

Other Affiliations

- In addition to being scheduled to speak at the anti-WHO event, the [IEA](#) was involved in launching the CCC in April 2017. [Christopher Snowden](#), the IEA’s “Head of Lifestyle Economics”, featured in the promotional video for the CCC’s launch event.⁷⁴
- At its launch event, the CCC disclosed that it “collaborated with” [EPICENTER](#), a free-market think tank collective, set up and funded by the IEA.⁷⁵
- CCC was represented by [Jeff Stier](#) at the launch of [Forest EU](#), a tobacco industry-funded pro-smoking group.⁷⁶

Relevant Links

- [Consumer Choice Center website](#)

TobaccoTactics Resources

- [Institute of Economic Affairs](#)
- [Atlas Network](#)
- [EPICENTER](#)
- [Forest EU](#)
- [Jeff Stier](#)
- [Christopher Snowdon](#)
- [Lobby_groups](#)

TCRG Research

[Exploring the Twitter activity around the eighth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control](#), L. Robertson, A. Joshi, T. Legg et al, *Tobacco Control*, 11 November 2020, doi: 10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2020-055889

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