

The Royal Institute of International Affairs

The think-tank lobbying the United Kingdom

The Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA) was founded in 1920 as the British Institute of International Affairs, as it was then known. The RIIA started out as a joint Anglo-American project in 1919, following a meeting between distinguished scholars at the Paris Peace Conference. In response to the devastating impact of World War I, emissaries, from both sides of the Atlantic shores, convened to carve out a strategy for the post-war period which lay ahead. A successive meeting was held that same year, again in Paris, at the Hotel Majestic where a group of British and American diplomats and scholars met on 30th May, 1919 undertaking the decision to create an organization called the "Institute of International Affairs", an Anglo-American think-tank operating from offices in London and New York. Due to isolationist views, at the time prevalent in American society, the scholars were faced with ontological obstacles in seeing their plan through, and shifted their efforts instead towards forming separate institutes.

The British delegation to the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 was convened by Lionel Curtis, a British professor and author. Curtis advocated British Empire Federalism, in the form of a federated union throughout the commonwealth countries, and, as he got older, a world state. By 1923, as the institute's membership grew, there was a need for a larger and more practical space, and the institute whence acquired a permanent base from which to operate: Chatham House, number 10 St. James's Square, London. This building once served as the residence of three British prime ministers: William Pitt, 1st Earl of Chatham; Edward Stanley; William Gladstone. In 1926, the institute received its royal charter, bestowed upon it on behalf of King George V. Its name was altered, thereupon, from the British Institute of International Affairs to the present day name. The Royal Institute of International Affairs is also referred to as "Chatham House".

Chatham House is the originator of the "Chatham House Rule" [see link:].
<http://www.chathamhouse.org/about/chatham-house-rule>

The Chatham House Rule reads as follows: *“When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.”*

Despite this, most meetings at Chatham House are held on the record, and not under the Chatham House Rule. This rule ostensibly originated for Chatham House to serve as a forum for uninhibited debate on world affairs, politics, economics, business and the environment, without a word leaking out to the press. Through the introduction of this anonymity, anyone can speak their mind, without fear of reprisal or criticism.

Chatham House research is structured around four departments:

- Energy, Environment and Resources
- International Economics
- International Security
- Area Studies and International Law

Research designated around Energy, Environment and Resources amalgamate around such topics dealing with conflict and peace-building around natural resources, fossil fuels and the impact on the environment, diet and climate change, petroleum resource management and output, etcetera.

The RIIA set up a global taskforce of experts in 2011, conducting research pertaining to International Economics to assess what contribution, if any, gold could make to the international monetary system in the wake of the global financial crisis. The taskforce released in February 2012 the report "Gold and the International Monetary System" which concluded that although a gold standard may have limited reckless banking and debt accumulation, it likely would have created some excessive constraint on national economic policies where more flexible responses were needed.

On affairs concerning International Security, the RIIA published in September 2010 a report examining support for populist extremists across Europe, and, recommending how mainstream political parties could respond. "Right Response: Understanding and Countering Populist Extremism in Europe", by Matthew Goodwin, noted that extreme parties more effectively exchange ideas and strategies as compared to the mainstream parties and recommended that established parties work better together on best practice to confront this challenge.

Regarding the fields of Area Studies and International Law, the RIIA did an analysis of the June 2009 Iranian presidential election voting figures. The report written by Ali Ansari, Daniel Berman and Thomas Rintoul revealed the irregularities in the official statistics, contradicting the official government line that a spate of newly participating voters had catapulted President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to victory.

The RIIA has two publications to its name which are International Affairs, a scholarly and policy journal, as well as The World Today, a bi-monthly global affairs magazine. Chatham House is routinely used as a source of information for media organizations seeking background or experts upon matters involving major international issues. The report on the June 2009 Iranian presidential election was widely cited by major media outlets, including the Financial Times, BBC, The Daily Telegraph, The Guardian, The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal.

Scattered throughout the Commonwealth of Nations, we find several think-tanks with affiliation to the RIIA. These include (excluding the Council on Foreign Relations):

- the Australian Institute of International Affairs
- the South African Institute of International Affairs
- the Indian Council on World Affairs
- the Pakistan Institute of International Affairs
- the Singapore Institute of International Affairs
- the Canadian International Council

In theory, membership is open to anyone who wishes to join the RIIA. Its membership roster is inclusive of corporations, academic institutions, NGOs, and any individuals, including students and under 35s, and its fees are relatively affordable, costing around £300 p/annum to join. The cynics will argue that this organization makes itself appear to be transparent by design in order to shroud the magnitude of its influence.

The subtext to the theory is that the RIIA, in effect, serves as a front for an unofficial international cabal of back room policy-makers who operate outside of the democratic process and influence matters of world importance. What is perhaps most intriguing is not necessarily the secretive origins of a group like the RIIA or even the way in which it has covertly manipulated, shaped and controlled British foreign policy for decades, or how it has managed to wield such considerable influence over world affairs via its various branch organizations. Instead, what is most fascinating about Chatham House is how open and accessible it is. Many of its meetings and its proceedings are publicly available. Its partners and corporate members are published on its website. Its journal is accessible to all. Its history, once shrouded in mystery, has been laid bare for all to see. For all that, the RIIA is rarely discussed as an important power centre in twenty first century society. Perhaps this is its greatest accomplishment, to hide its enormous influence and its ongoing role in steering global geo-politics; not by hiding, but rather, by putting itself so much in the public spotlight that it seems mundane. It should also be noted that the Council on Foreign Relations in the U.S. operates similarly.