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The Man From ALEC

Was Tommy Thompson a key figure in the rise of the conservative American Legislative Exchange Council?

By [Steve Schuster and Ricardo Torres](#) - Nov 5th, 2012 11:15 am

There's no doubt who has the most impressive resume in the race for U.S. Senate between Democratic congresswoman **Tammy Baldwin** and former Republican governor **Tommy Thompson**. Thompson served 18 years in the Wisconsin assembly, 14 years as governor, the longest such tenure in Wisconsin history, was a presidential cabinet member under **George W. Bush**, and ran for president in 2008. His fans and endorsements range from the Milwaukee Professional Firefighters Association to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce to a group called the American Chemistry Council, which has spent \$648,600 on pro-Tommy campaign ads.

But late in the campaign there has been increasing attention on another group connected to Thompson: the American Legislative Exchange Council (also known as ALEC), a corporate-backed conservative group that works to push state legislatures to the right. Since Republican **Scott Walker** became governor with a GOP-controlled legislature, many have noted the group's impact on laws passed here. [Green Bay's FOX 11 says](#) ALEC is "a group that works behind-the-scenes to advance conservative causes across the country and here in Wisconsin."

The [Huffington Post reported](#) on "a wide-ranging legislative agenda in (Wisconsin's) State Capitol that seemed to come out of the blue. Anti-consumer bills, union busting legislation, voter ID, enormous tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy along with requirements for "super majority" votes to raise revenue were fast tracked through the legislature."

ALEC has refused multiple media requests to even disclose a list of its Wisconsin members. But the liberal Center for Media and Democracy released a [report](#) in May on ALEC in Wisconsin – "The Hijacking of a State," – which examined the 2011-12 cycle of legislation and found that 21 bills passed were based on or influenced by model bills created by ALEC legislation. The report also found that 49 of Wisconsin's legislators are members of the group.

Thompson was a member of ALEC (which was founded in 1973) in its "formative years," back when Thompson was a legislator, according to ALEC website. In 1991 he received the group's Jefferson Freedom Award, given annually to a lawmaker who "advances the fundamental Jeffersonian principles of free markets, limited government, federalism, and individual liberty." Thompson was ALEC's second Jefferson award winner, preceded only by Ronald Reagan.

Thompson has called himself an avid supporter of ALEC. In a speech to a group of ALEC members

in 2002 Thompson said “Myself, I always loved going to [ALEC] meetings because I always found new ideas. Then I’d take them back to Wisconsin, disguise them a little bit, and declare that ‘It’s mine.’”

The first time the quote was broadcasted was in a documentary called “Corrections, Inc.,” by American RadioWorks which was released in April 2002.

When **Nick Surgey**, staff council for Common Cause, heard the quote, it took him years to track down the actual speech itself. He asked one of the producers of the film for a copy the tape and they shipped the tape via FedEx (the only known copy).

“I think Tommy Thompson felt safe in that audience,” Surgey says, adding the audience was full of other ALEC members. “It’s a remarkable admission really, by him. It’s not the way he talks in public.”

Thompson’s campaign did not respond to several telephone calls and emails requesting comment. But in an [interview with Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](#) columnist **Dan Bice**, Thompson at first claimed he didn’t remember the talk and later said, “I was just congratulating them. I was trying to encourage them to keep getting ideas out there. I can’t remember any idea I ever brought back from ALEC.”

But **Lisa Graves**, executive director of the Center for Media and Democracy, scoffs at Thompson’s explanation. “There’s a way to say congratulations to a group, it’s called ‘congratulations,’” she says. “He can try to pretend, in essence, that he didn’t say what he meant back then but I think he meant exactly what he meant back then.”

To Bice, Thompson also denied that his well-known reforms like school choice and W-2 welfare reform came from ALEC. But a [story in Mother Jones](#) argues that school choice and a 1998 Truth-in-Sentencing law championed by Thompson were both based on ALEC legislation.

“Indeed,” the story concluded, “ALEC might not be the organization it is today without Thompson’s involvement and inspiration.”

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