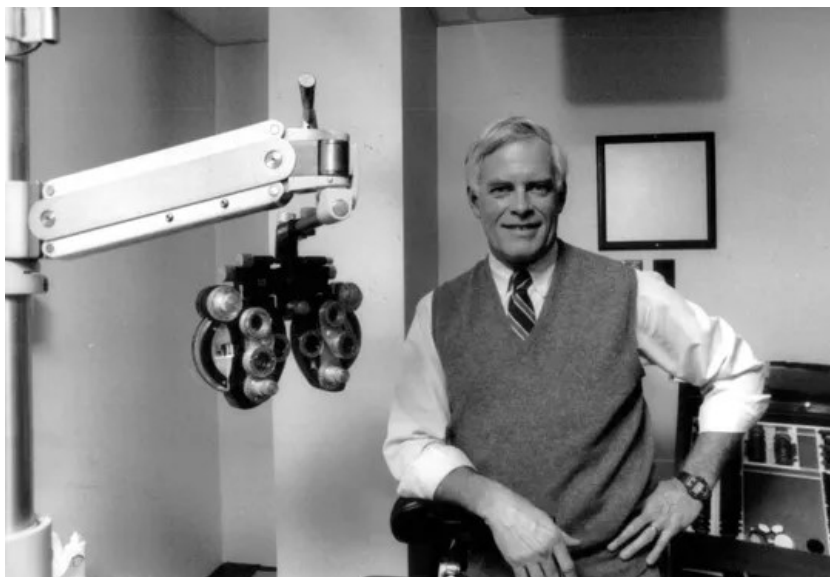


Anti-immigrant leader Dr. John Tanton of Michigan dies at 85

Niraj Warikoo, Detroit Free Press Published 9:47 a.m. ET July 18, 2019 | Updated 11:22 a.m. ET July 18, 2019

Buy Photo



Dr. John Tanton, an ophthalmologist, in his Petoskey office in February 1989. From the story, "has been beseeching the nation for years to make English its official language before it's too late, and to zip up its borders before the tide of illegal immigrants turns into a torrent." (Photo: Alan R. Kamuda, Detroit Free Press)

Dr. John Tanton, an ophthalmologist in Michigan who became an anti-immigrant leader criticized by civil rights advocates as being racist but praised by his supporters, died in Petoskey on Tuesday. He was 85.

Tanton established several groups calling for reduced immigration and his ideas have had a significant influence on the immigration debate, helping drive some of the immigration policies under President Donald Trump. He was described by the Southern Poverty Law Center as the racist architect of the modern anti-immigrant movement.

The president of a group he founded that calls for sharp reductions in immigration, Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), said [in a statement](https://www.fairus.org/press-releases/message-president/), (<https://www.fairus.org/press-releases/message-president/>) "this remarkable giant of a man ... passed Tuesday quietly in his home town of Petoskey, Michigan."

"Those who knew him recognized a unique personality: A person with extraordinary persistence in promoting ideas based on a careful analysis of how today's decisions affect the future," said Daniel Stein, president of FAIR.

Tanton had been suffering from Parkinson's disease in recent years.

In a statement on behalf of his family, Dale Herder, the board chairman of a group Tanton founded, US Inc, said "Dr. Tanton's long illness ended Tuesday,

July 16th, shortly after 1 p.m. local time. He will be missed by everyone in our office and by our community."

"His leadership as an environmentalist, and as a population and immigration expert, has inspired thinkers and leaders in our nation for over half a century."

Immigrant advocates said Tanton's legacy can be seen today in current immigration policies.

"Most of the horrible ideas on immigration being implemented today originate from groups this man founded. History won't treat him kindly," Greg Siskind, an immigration attorney who is a member of the Board of Governors of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, said Thursday. (<https://twitter.com/gsiskind/status/1151827692469260288>)

Born in Detroit, Tanton graduated from Michigan State University in 1956 and then the University of Michigan's medical school.

After becoming an eye doctor, he became active in population control and environmental issues, leading Michigan chapters of the Sierra Club and Planned Parenthood. That led him to focus on immigration issues, arguing what he saw as excessive immigration would harm the U.S.

More: [University of Michigan blocks release of hot-button records of anti-immigrant leader \(/story/news/2017/10/17/university-michigan-blocks-release-anti-immigrant-records/732133001/\)](/story/news/2017/10/17/university-michigan-blocks-release-anti-immigrant-records/732133001/)

More: [Anti-immigrant leader focus of 10 secret boxes at U-M library \(/story/news/2018/08/16/battle-detroit-courtroom-over-records-anti-immigrant-leader/990677002/\)](/story/news/2018/08/16/battle-detroit-courtroom-over-records-anti-immigrant-leader/990677002/)

More: [Appeals Court favors release of University of Michigan records of anti-immigrant leader \(/story/news/local/michigan/2019/07/06/university-of-michigan-sealed-records-anti-immigrant-leader/1635813001/\)](/story/news/local/michigan/2019/07/06/university-of-michigan-sealed-records-anti-immigrant-leader/1635813001/)

He created or helped create and fund several groups that called for big reductions in immigration. Tanton also founded Social Contract Press, publishers of anti-immigrant books and pamphlets, including an English translation of "The Camp of the Saints" – a novel that is popular with white supremacists.

Tanton has been accused of making racist remarks against Latinos and Catholics in his warnings against immigration from Latin America.

"I've come to the point of view that for European-American society and culture to persist requires a European-American majority, and a clear one at that," Tanton wrote in a 1993 letter.

In 1997 interview with the Detroit Free Press, Tanton compared immigrants to bacteria.

"In the bacteriology lab, we have culture plates," he said. "You put a bug in there and it starts growing and gets bigger and bigger and bigger. And it grows until it finally fills the whole plate. And it crashes and dies. That's the big picture. If you don't buy that, then there's nothing we can talk about."

In 1986 memo, he warned of Latino immigrant birthrates being higher than white birthrates. He warned of "fertile" Latino Catholics not using birth control because of Catholic doctrine outgrowing white Protestants.

"Perhaps this is the first instance in which those with their pants up are going to get caught by those with their pants down," Tanton wrote.

A FAIR spokesman told the Free Press in 2017 that the claims Tanton was racist are "ridiculous."

His supporters say he was ahead of his time, and that his views are now more accepted. Stein called him a "Renaissance Man."



1997 photo of Dr. John Tanton, a retired ophthalmologist in Petoskey and a leader in the anti-immigration movement. He died Tuesday, July 18, 2019. (Photo: STEPHANIE SINCLAIR, DETROIT FREE PRESS)

"He was interested in so many different topics and areas that no one person could see the entire picture," Stein said. "He was interested in history and the future, in population policy and its related ecological considerations; he was concerned about environmental preservation, and culture and family planning, and assimilation and the collective culture that makes a nation successful over time ... the list goes on and on. And he made those ideas move with incredible success over time."

Attorney and immigrant advocate Hassan Ahmad [filed a lawsuit \(/story/news/2017/10/17/university-michigan-blocks-release-anti-immigrant-records/732133001/\)](/story/news/2017/10/17/university-michigan-blocks-release-anti-immigrant-records/732133001/) in 2017 against the University of Michigan to get several boxes of sealed records and letters donated to them by Tanton.



Attorneys (left to right) Hassan Ahmad, Phil Ellison, Humza Kazmi, outside courtroom at Michigan Court of Appeals in Detroit. They're battling to get sealed papers of Dr. John Tanton from University of Michigan. (Photo: Niraj Warikoo)

Last month, an appeals court ruled in favor of Ahmad, saying the files should be released.

Ahmad said Thursday that "Tanton's role in the current cruelty fest cannot be overstated. Most people don't get what a central role he played. ... Tanton was a flamethrower."

Ahmad is concerned that Tanton's ideas will still be influential.

"Tanton may be gone, but his thought lives on," Ahmad said

According to Tom Jawetz, vice president for immigration policy at the Center for American Progress, Tanton was eulogized Wednesday on the podcast of a prominent white nationalist.

In his 1986 memo, Tanton warned of possible violence from whites if there was too much immigration from non-white nations, writing: "As whites see their power and control over their lives declining, will they simply go quietly into the night? Or will there be an explosion?"

In 1989, Tanton told the Free Press that he was not a racist.

"I am not a separatist," Tanton said. "I believe in the melting pot. I don't care what the pigment in your skin is or the slant of your eyes. I don't care what goes into the melting pot as long as it doesn't blow up and run over."

Herder said in the family statement: "For anyone wishing to extend their condolences, please send them to Mary Lou Tanton and Family, c/o US Inc., 445 E. Mitchell St., Ste. D, Petoskey, MI 49770."

Contact Niraj Warikoo: nwarikoo@freepress.com, 313-223-4792, Twitter [@nwarikoo](https://www.twitter.com/nwarikoo) (<https://www.twitter.com/nwarikoo>)

Read or Share this story: <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2019/07/18/anti-immigrant-john-tanton-dies/1764377001/>