

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

A New Era for Think Tanks in Public Policy? International Trends, Australian Realities

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Although the powerful have always sought advice from the knowledgeable, it took the appeal of the policy sciences movement of the late 1940s and onward to build and consolidate a veritable industry of policy analysis and advice.¹ One of the hallmarks of this development was the advent of institutes that were exclusively devoted to produce research-based policy arguments and to inject these into the policy-making process. These organisations were referred to as 'think tanks'. Half a century later, the project of the policy sciences movement has been amply criticised, and has mutated into various philosophies of policy analysis, each harbouring distinct and often conflicting perspectives on the nature and role of (scientific) knowledge in the battle of arguments that is public policy-making. The first wave of the policy sciences movement's privileging of science-based policy has not disappeared. In fact it is currently experiencing a revival under the banner of 'evidence-based policy'. But it has to compete with other views of public policy-making which deconstruct the authority claim of scientific knowledge, emphasising instead its contestability. Yet there are now more organisations that refer to themselves, or can be labelled, as 'think tanks' than ever before. Why? And what does it mean to be a 'think tank' in the post-positivist era and in the increasingly boundary-less, highly networked societies of today? This article first surveys recent developments in the world of think tanks as reported by the international literature on the subject, and then examines the implications for understanding the nature and role of Australian think tanks.

Key words: *think tanks, policy impact, policy relevance*

The term think tank is a verbal container which accommodates a heterogenous set of meanings. Classic, positivist conceptions of think tanks vie with post-positivist and even post-modern ones. Goodman (2005) represents the classic school. He views think tanks as 'idea factories' conceived of as 'organisations that sponsor research on specific problems, encourage the discovery of solutions to those problems, and facilitate interaction among scientists and intellectuals in the pursuit of these goals.' Think tanks, in other words, are research-driven entities operating at the forefront of

applied knowledge production. He adds that policy-oriented think tanks 'explicitly focus on governmental policies, usually for the purpose of improving those policies or creating viable alternatives.'

A notion that emphasises the essentially political role of think tanks can be found in Rich (2004:11): 'independent, non-interest based, non-profit organisations that produce and principally rely on expertise and ideas to obtain support and influence the policy-making process.' Note that the key aim of think tanks in this conception is to be influential in the policy

process, and that in order to achieve that, think tanks need sufficient support. Others, such as Stone (2000a), emphasise that think tanks also do things that go well beyond this conventional picture. Citing Keohane and Nye, she observes that “Think tank” is an informal “brand name” for organisations able to reliably “edit and credibly validate information.” They are, in other words, “third party vetters of trust.” Note that research or even autonomous production of ideas is no longer part of the core business; it is about ‘editing’ and ‘validating’ information. This sits close to a post-positivist picture about the role of knowledge in politics and public policy, which emphasises the inherent contestability of knowledge, the importance of ‘framing’ policy issues in particular, contestable ways, and the emergence of ‘discourse coalitions’ sharing particular policy narratives (Fischer 2003; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003).

It is consequently impossible and undesirable to fully accept one particular definition of what a think tank is or ought to be. This emerges clearly in Stone and Denham’s (2004) global survey of think tank traditions, which highlights the importance of national institutions and trajectories in organising and dealing with ‘knowledge for policy’. In light of this, it is perhaps more productive to use a tentative working definition, such as ‘policy-oriented, knowledge-intensive idea producers and processors.’ With that in hand we can discern a few distinct species of think tanks, whose incidence, role and importance in any polity or policy domain can then be ascertained empirically. The most prevalent of these are the following (Braml 2006; McGann and Weaver 2000:6–12):

- *Academic think tanks*: university-based or otherwise non-aligned (endowment-driven) organisations largely devoted to undertaking and disseminating scientific research, and seeking to provide input in public policy discussions on that basis. The Lowy Institute in Australia (established 2003) is an example of an endowment based independent think tank which focuses on long-term, strategic issues in trade and foreign policy.
- *Government think tanks*: in-house research and/or strategy divisions, or fully government funded, yet autonomous policy research institutes. Most governments have such entities, which are comparatively well-resourced and enjoy budgetary stability that other types of think tanks often lack. This comes at the price of the onus of not being truly independent (and therefore less inclined to address issues that might be controversial with the government of the day). In practice, there are major differences in the statutory position as well as the de facto independence of government think tanks. In Australia, for example, this includes institutions such as the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the Australian Institute of Family Studies and the Productivity Commission. All enjoy a relatively high degree of autonomy in the way they conduct and report their research. Their reports are taken seriously as a contribution to knowledge and policy-making but at the same time, there is a degree of government influence in setting these institute’s strategic priorities and annual work plans.
- *Contract research think tanks*: bundles of policy experts conducting ‘on demand’ research, eg, non-profit counterparts of private consulting firms, but on a not-for-profit basis. Many universities contain such entities, some partially established with government funding, and competing for funds both inside and outside academia. For example, a research centre such as the Social Policy Research Centre based at the University of New South Wales is recognised as producing academic research and contributing to policy debates, yet the majority of its funding is not from the university but from the awarding of competitive government research contracts.
- *Policy advocacy think tanks*: ideologically-driven, financially and/or organisationally connected institutes, which tend to devote at least as much attention to dissemination and marketing ideas as to producing them. Australian political party research institutes including the Australian Labor Party’s

(ALP) Chifley Research Centre, The Liberal Party's Menzies Research Centre and the National Party's Page Research Centre all fall into this category. As do formally free-standing but de facto politically 'committed' think tanks such as the Centre for Independent Studies, the Institute of Public Affairs, the Sydney Institute and the Australia Institute.

The think tank industry has experienced major growth during the last few decades. McGann and Weaver (2000) explain this surge in the number, geographic distribution (a lot of the growth occurred outside the OECD countries) and total turnover of think tanks by pointing to the underlying trends that have made it possible. These include: the large increase in the number of states, and thus clients for policy advice, in the de-colonisation period; regime change in post-communist and post-dictatorial societies which created countries that often literally had to start anew; a growth in the number of bilateral and multilateral donors using think tanks to encourage recipient countries to adopt good governance practices; the high pace of technical and social change generating demand for 'usable knowledge' concerning the new policy challenges and opportunities that flow from them (see Lindblom and Cohen 1979); and quantum leaps in communication technology which enable quick production and diffusion of knowledge.

In the classic think tank idea, someone gathers a group of highly qualified experts – preferably from a range of academic disciplines – and asks them to focus their attention on a series of socially relevant issues and themes; they investigate, brainstorm and present solid papers with clear and cogent policy recommendations; these products are then led into the corridors of power. In this model, the success and failure of a think tank hinges upon three factors:

1. the intrinsic research quality of its staff;
2. its ability to communicate research-driven policy arguments to non-expert audiences; and
3. its reputation for intellectual quality and integrity.

One of the interesting changes in recent years is encapsulated in what 'gathering experts' may entail. In the classical model, gathering meant putting people under one roof, both organisationally and physically. The classic American, British, Scandinavian, German and Dutch think tanks all have a sizable building, significant numbers of permanent staff, and a formal bureaucratic intellectual hierarchy. All this presumes a serious budget and thus a pivotal task for think tank management becomes safeguarding that budget. New generation think tanks operate on a different model, enabled by the internet to limit the debilitating effects of limited funding. They are quasi virtual organisations: a (very) small permanent staff which manages a sometimes extensive network of experts, financiers, partners and clients. To some degree these 'virtual' think tanks free ride on the universities, their main recruiting ground for project researchers, which they either do not pay at all or on a short contract-only basis for the time and reputation of the experts they mobilise.

This emergent form of think tanks organising has also pervaded the very *modus operandi* of what 'think-tankery' is all about. To draw a sharp contrast with the three success factors of the classical model: it is no longer about producing but about locating research; and it is no longer about getting 'leverage' for one's own ideas but about effective 'brokerage,' ie, organising interaction between and discursively connecting suppliers and consumers on the market for policy ideas. The new model does not really replace the classical one. There will always be a role for groups of policy intellectuals and applied scientists operating in the classical vein. But they do operate in an increasingly dense and to some extent competitive environment. Their main competitors are new-style institutes of knowledge brokers who do not always engage in but rather facilitate idea production, and are especially adept at organising events and forums in which these ideas can evolve and 'land' in the right places at the right times. New style think tanks resemble Kingdon's image of the policy entrepreneur (Abelson 2002), or perhaps even more Lukes' third face of power, in that they focus on shaping the terms,

times and arenas where policy issues get debated; and they are first and foremost managers of ideas and discourse (Warpole 1998:153). Osborne (2004:35) hits the core of the trend. He observes:

... a more widely perceivable “turn” in the organisation of knowledge in Britain today. Increasingly, it seems, intellectual and knowledge workers find themselves called upon to be something like “mediators,” bringing ideas quickly and decisively into public focus, brokering their ideas in the context of different spheres of influence. The mediator is not simply a “media” intellectual, but also someone for whom ideas are more like instruments than principles; a motivator of ideas that “work,” and have purchase, rather than ideals that dimly reverberate; an expert as much in the context and fields in which ideas operate as in the intellectual content of ideas themselves.

Osborne’s picture is one of unreconstructed Deweyan pragmatism: the knowledge broker should not seek to speak truth to power in the classical sense of the (positivist) policy expert, but instead to seek out ideas ‘which are going to make a difference, and especially ideas which are “vehicular” rather than “oracular”’ (Osborne 2004:441). In such a post-positivist perspective on think tanks, the ultimate success criterion has little to do with substantive expertise, academic reputability and so on. Instead, the focus is on their discursive leverage in the relevant policy subsystems, particularly (but not exclusively) among key policy-makers and stakeholder elites, eg, when think-tank produced frames and narratives begin to pervade elite rhetoric and policy proposals circulating in the policy subsystem.

In many ways, the world of think tanks differs little from other emerging and modernising professions: everywhere you look there is growing horizontalisation, boundary-crossing, contractualisation, speeding-up, and decreasing attention spans. And so the need for ‘connectivity,’ brokerage and mediation grows (Mulgan 1997). This means that the balance of priorities for think tank principals is shifting. Instead of maximising one’s capacity to produce knowledge they should now give serious, if not equal consideration, to building up exper-

tise in the management of complex networks and policy processes.

The Policy Relevance of Think Tanks

Do think tanks contribute to the policy capacity of the polities in which they operate, or of the governments they engage with? The answer to this question depends to a large degree on the view of ‘knowledge diffusion’ one chooses to entertain. The think tank literature is divided here. One camp has embraced Weiss’ ideas about ‘enlightenment.’ In this view, knowledge does not generally click with public policy or governmental actors directly. It filters through only gradually, and often in a roundabout, unpredictable fashion. In this view, ‘people who want important public policy changes need to be willing to make long-term investments’ (Goodman 2005). This applies to policy advocates of any kind, whether they are interest-group lobbyists selling their ideas or science-driven independent think tanks. The alternative view is that the market for policy ideas has become as competitive, dynamic and opportunistic as markets for many other goods are, and that therefore the key criterion for think tank success should be the direct adoption of think tank ideas in political party and bureaucratic agendas and programs. In political arenas populated by opportunistic cognitive misers, patient attempts to educate policy-makers are not likely to succeed, they have switched focus long before the veracity or usefulness of the original message begins to kick in. Think tanks instead need to be able to ‘capture’ policy actors by providing them with vivid, compelling encounters and experiences that speak to their current pre-occupations. Ideas that ‘work’ rather than ‘are true,’ as Osborne (2004) observed. Contract research and government think tanks in particular will need clear evidence of their work’s ability to directly affect policy predicaments, which is perhaps somewhat less the case for the other two types.

Empirical research about the impact of think tanks is hard to come by, if only because it too cannot escape the methodological riddle of measuring influence. The most advanced studies in this vein are by Abelson (2002, 2006)

and particularly Rich (2004). Focusing on the United States (US) situation and employing the most robust research methods, Rich shows that the question of measuring the influence of think tanks unveils an intriguing paradox: the think tanks that are most widely cited in the mass media are not seen by policy-makers themselves as particularly influential. It is easy to confuse high visibility in public arenas with high impact in the real corridors of power, where different laws of demand and supply and different concepts of utility from those prevailing in the mass media arena apply. Generating a certain amount of publicity for one's activities and products is a necessary condition for think tanks to remain on the mental map of funders and key 'influence targets' in the policy community. However, it is certainly not a sufficient condition for having policy impact.

Rich (2004) furthermore demonstrates that think tanks must place their interventions at the early stages of the policy cycle. Their influence in framing and prioritising issues at the agenda-setting stage was often quite profound. In contrast, when they intervened in policy debates concerning the choice between alternatives and the design of policy instruments, they were more at risk of being co-opted or upstaged by interest groups.

Think Tank Developments and Policy Impact in Australia

Moving from the general survey of think tank developments to an assessment of their nature and role in Australian public policy, our 2007 scan depicted in Table 1, reveals the existence of a reasonable volume and political pluralism of think tanks in Australia. In this table we have used the four categories of think tanks: academic; government; contract; and policy advocacy; developed in this article. Note this table is not an exhaustive list of think tanks in Australia it is purely illustrative to demonstrate that a range of think tank types exist in contemporary Australian policy-making. Including a broader range of think tank actors means that our findings do not fully support Marsh and Stone's observation that in Australia 'think tanks are small and relatively unimportant organisations'

as they 'have not consolidated as a strong policy advice industry as in the USA' (2004:262). While their observation is certainly true if one takes the US, where multi-million dollar think tank budgets are common, as the main standard (see Abelson 2004:222–223), the last few years has seen the emergence of new think tank players in Australia from a range of partisan and non-partisan perspectives. This echoes our general observation that in today's networked world the start-up and maintenance costs of think tanks are much lower than they used to be. Moreover, although we have not conducted systematic research in assessing think tank influence in Australia, our suspicion is that overall, the broader range of think tanks and the low costs of information distribution have contributed to think tank ideas becoming more visible, debated and considered.

This does not mean that think tank influence is equally distributed, of course. Many academic commentators suggest that, in Australia, conservative think tanks have the ear of governments more so than progressive voices calling for policy change (see Cahill 2002; Mendes 2003; Mowbray 2003; Maddison and Hamilton 2007). The established, mostly neo-liberal, think tanks have the tightest connection to international, especially US-based, counterparts (see Beder 2000:82) and, as Table 1 shows, are relatively better resourced. Marsh (1995:79) also acknowledges that conservative think tanks have been influential in policy-making through using their strategic research to formulate 'agendas concerned with economic liberalisation, privatisation, deregulation, labour market reform and contraction of government'. One recent example of the influence of conservative think tanks in policy agenda-setting is the contractual relationship between the federal coalition government and the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA). While most of the policy advocacy think tanks proclaim they do not accept government funding the IPA was commissioned to write a critical report on government's funding and advocacy relationships with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (see Johns and Roskam 2004).

Glover (2006) charts the relationship between the conservative Centre for Independent

Table 1. Australian Think Tanks: An Illustrative List

	Date established	Annual revenue (based on most recent figures available in annual reports)	Areas of policy research and contribution to policy debate
Academic think tanks			
Committee for Economic Development of Australia	1960	\$5.7 mill	Economic development and policy
Lowy Institute	2003	Est. \$5 mill.	Foreign policy and region
Institute of Transport and Logistical Studies (USyd)	1995	\$2.7 mill	Transport policy
US Studies Centre (USyd)	2006	\$70 mill. end	Foreign policy and US relations
Key Centre for Women's Health (UMelb)	1988	est. \$1.5 mill	Women's health policy
Centre of Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (ANU)	1990	\$1.3 mill	Indigenous policy
Government think tanks			
Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics	1987	n/a	Commodities and natural resources
Australian Institute of Criminology	1973	\$8 mill	Criminology research
Australian Strategic Policy Institute	2002	\$3 mill.	Defence and strategic policy
Australian Institute Health and Welfare	1987	\$23 mill.	Health and welfare statistics
Australian Institute of Family Studies	1980	\$10 mill.	Family and society
Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission	1981	\$16.5 mill	Human rights
Productivity Commission	1998	\$29 mill.	Economic and social policy
Contract research think tanks			
George Institute for International Health (Usyd)	1999	\$31.3 mill	International health policy & programs
National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (UNSW)	1986	\$1.4 mill	Drug & alcohol, harm minimisation
Social Policy Research Centre (UNSW)	1980	\$2.8 mill	Social policy
Work Research Centre (USyd) (formerly ACIRRT)	1989	\$1.8 mill.	Work and industrial relations policy
Australian Centre for Education Research	1930	\$31 mill	Education research and policy
Policy advocacy think tanks			
Centre for Independent Studies (CIS)	1976	\$1.7 mill.	Public policy & free enterprise
The Institute of Public Affairs (IPA)	1943	\$800,000	Free market public policies
The Sydney Institute	1989	\$900,000	Public policy
The Australia Institute	1994	\$450,000	Environment, social policy
The Climate Institute	2005	\$10 mill end	Climate change and environment
Page Research Centre (Nats)	2002	n/a	Rural and National Party policy
Menzies Research Centre (Libs)	1994	\$100,000	Competition and limited govt
Chifley Research Centre (ALP)	2000	\$100,000	Public policy & progressive thinking

Source: Organisational websites; Norington 2003a; Marsh and Stone 2004:251.

Notes: The 'Government think tanks' were mainly sourced from a site that lists government departments that actively disseminate research to the media: <http://australia.gov.au/media-sites#ag>. Most are independent statutory authorities instigated by an Act of Parliament and they all state on their homepage that they aim to shape public policy. University and contract research centres were mainly identified by looking through the homepages of the Go8 universities to locate research centres that were also engaged in media work and policy debate. Where the majority of money was not from the university or untied endowments (or ARC/NHMRC grants) but was government contract research or private sector funding, the organisations were classified as contract research think tanks. The information on university based research centres was very patchy as very few had annual reports with which to verify their income stream and their policy advocacy activities (especially those at UQ, UWA, Monash). Therefore many potentially interesting and influential research institutes and centres have not been included in this illustrative list. None of the policy advocacy centres had online annual reports that listed their total amount and source of revenue. Here the data on revenue is taken from Norington (2003a) or Marsh and Stone (2004).

Studies (CIS) and the coalition government, to estimate that the conservative think tanks, mainly CIS and IPA, have spent about \$45 million since 1996 influencing the direction of political debate in Australia. This pronouncement is, however, only based on calculating the combined revenue of these two organisations over the last 10 years. He also suggests that the response from the left has been insufficient, (narrowly) conceived by him as ALP associated entities mentioned below, having only spent '\$1.5 million developing and marketing political ideas'. Yet there are other progressive organisations that do not fit with his definition that have emerged in recent times, such as the Australia Institute and the Climate Institute. However, Glover's overall point is important: when examining think tanks engaged in overt political advocacy, the explicitly conservative organisations dominate, and during the Howard era have been successful in leveraging political opportunities in a more conservative political climate.

These are not the only types of think tanks conducting research and influencing policy debate in contemporary Australian politics. The table shows that the three political party associated think tanks have very small budgets, they produce minimal research or papers, and possibly employ only one or two people. This suggests that they are very minor players in developing policy ideas for their associated political parties, certainly when compared to Western European political party think tanks. For example, Menzies does not seem to have produced any research publications since 2003, Chifley since 2004, and the Page Institute appears to be dormant. A former union and ALP left associated think tank, the Evatt Foundation, is run primarily by volunteers and has minimal funding (see Norington 2003a), but it has a more vibrant online presence, more effectively leveraging the new opportunities for running shoe-string, yet prolific think tanks as signalled above. The Evatt Foundation holds regular events and addresses current policy debates more so than the other three organisations. In keeping with its shoe-string nature, however, the Evatt Foundation has not been facilitating substantial research publications of its own recently, relying

more on transcripts from public talks, media type current affairs commentary, and book reviews to generate discussion.

New generation think tanks described above in the body of the article are now being seen in Australia. For example, several small think tanks have all started in the last two years, clearly relying on the internet for dissemination of ideas and underpinned by very broad networks of high profile spokespeople, academic researchers and experienced commentators. These new think tanks include the Centre for Policy Development (affiliated to progressive online journal *New Matilda*), Per Capita (started by former ALP staffers and employees of UK progressive think tanks), Australian Environment Foundation (linked to IPA and run by Jennifer Marohasy with television gardening personality Don Burke as public spokesperson), and a revitalised version of the Australian Fabians. These organisations clearly fit the model of having a small core yet are connected to a large and pluralistic network of experts, partners, funding bodies, users and mini-publics.

Simultaneously, well funded new think tanks have emerged at the start of the 21st century. Here we see the multi million dollar budgets and an explicit mandate to focus on influencing policy agendas through framing and prioritising issues at the agenda-setting stage. In this category there are the two new academic think tanks: US Studies Centre (based at the University of Sydney) and the Lowy Institute; and the policy advocacy think tank: the Climate Institute. All three of these new organisations unite traditional academic 'thinkers' and 'experts' mostly with PhDs and previous experience in university-based research with staff who act as 'idea brokers' and 'process managers' who either have a prominent social movement or high level public policy background. For example, the Lowy Institute brings together a wide range of political actors in its seminar series but at its core has a research staff of 10 individuals: only one is a woman, three have PhDs and academic backgrounds with the remainder, including the Director Alan Gyngell, having high level experience in the federal public service, especially the Department of

Foreign Affairs and Trade. The Lowy Institute has quickly generated a successful 'brand name' since its' founding in 2003 with a high profile in both policy and corporate circles, and in gaining media attention for its research publications (see Costello 2005). There are regular public seminars and invitation-only events held in its luxurious heritage-listed office space in the Sydney central business district.

Also of increasing importance in Australia is the role of philanthropic organisations in providing generous funding to progressive think tanks. For example, the Poola Foundation, through the Tom Kantor fund, provided the \$10 million endowment over five years to establish the Climate Institute in 2005. This new think tank's board is chaired by Mark Wootton from Poola, former New South Wales Premier Bob Carr is one of two people on its external advisory committee, and the day to day operations are overseen by chief executive officer John Connor, formerly of Greenpeace Australia. The Poola Foundation also gives money to the Australia Institute and funds many environmental and indigenous groups and causes throughout Australia.

The last, and often least considered, story contained within the table above is of the ostensibly less politicised think tanks which are revenue wealthy and highly influential organisations, such as contract research centres and government think tanks. Note here that our list of these particular organisational types is by no means comprehensive, as there is limited access to primary and secondary sources on these organisations that detail history and revenue. Instead we have included a selection of well known research centres that are based at only the group of eight (Go8) research intensive universities. We argue that these centres all have an openly publicised commitment to influencing policy debate through their research output and this is what makes them like think tanks.

Saunders and Walter (2005:7) suggest that there has been a growth in both contract based research centres and consultancies as the Australian public service has increasingly been obliged to outsource research functions. These organisations are winning competitive grants

from federal and state governments to undertake research that often, similarly to classic understandings of think tanks, shapes public policy debates. For example, the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) based at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) sees both media dissemination of its research and influence on public policy agendas as key to its mandate. One of its projects, for instance, the Illicit Drugs Reporting System, funded by the Australian government Department of Health and Ageing, reports on emerging drug markets and drug use and is able to shape subsequent policy responses. Similarly, the very well resourced Australian Centre for Education Research is well recognised within the media for its expertise on educational policy issues. It lists 16 areas of expertise on its website that it will provide media commentary on, topics ranging from civics education to indigenous education to literacy and transitions from school to work.

We suggest that perhaps the climate is changing for social sciences research conducted by university based research institutes. There is an increased emphasis on obtaining contract-based research rather than having core block funding for research projects. In addition, over the last five years there has been a small shift in Australian Research Council project funding towards applied research through Linkage Grants (from 38% to 43% of total project funds), rather than predominantly funding basic research through Discovery Grants (see http://www.arc.gov.au/negp/lp/lp_outcomes.htm). However, fully evaluating this shift is beyond the scope of this paper and deserves further attention in light of the changing focus of knowledge production and research in Australia.

Table 1 provides a comprehensive list of research institutes funded within government at the federal level. These organisations are very well funded and are very influential contributors within policy debate. Organisations such as the Productivity Commission are recognised as setting the agenda on recent reform in areas of competition policy and microeconomic policy more generally (see Marsh 2005:230; Quiggin 2005:27). Other government think tanks have changed with the policy climate.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies has remained important in providing research on Australian families through its research agenda, biannual conferences and in promoting policy discussion (Pocock 2005:134), while others, especially Human Rights Equal Opportunity Commission, have been downgraded, become less influential and have a diminished profile in both policy and public debate (Bulbeck 2005:148). Conversely, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute is one of the newest government think tanks and has had a high profile due to the strengthened focus on Australian foreign and defence policy, especially the threat of terrorism.

Emergent Challenges for Think Tanks in the Public Policy Process

Think tanks, both classic and new ones, are here to stay. But just like any other supplier on a volatile competitive market, think tanks can only survive and prosper if they adapt flexibly to new developments. This article has briefly signalled some of these developments. Overlooking the recent international literature on think tanks, five key challenges for current and future think tanks in and beyond Australia stand out.

Given their rising numbers, there are likely to be *increased competitive pressures to get the ear of the relevant policy-makers and other 'idea users' in the policy process*. Some of the factors enabling the expansion of think tanks outlined above refer to historical, non-recurrent developments (de-colonisation; democratisation). The more powerful, ongoing factors pertain to the supply, not the demand side of the equation (information technology, diversification). This trend is likely to continue. Moreover, other main players on the knowledge-for-policy market, such as universities, are faced with increasing strategic and financial incentives to move more and more into applied, policy-relevant activities. For example, in Australia there is an increasing emphasis on academic-industry joint research projects through the Australian Research Council funded Linkage Grants program. Universities are also now

'branding' their expertise and 'showcasing' the individuals who symbolise this. The London School of Economics (LSE) is one of many examples, maintaining a 'media index' of LSE experts, who present themselves as such in a standardised fashion on their departmental and institute web pages (Osborne 2004:432). In Australia, many of the group of eight leading universities have a media link on their front page which directs media inquiries to high profile researchers (through 'find an expert' functions), current research projects, and includes podcasts and vodcasts of recent presentations (eg, see University of Melbourne at <http://newsroom.unimelb.edu.au/>; and the Australian National University at <http://info.anu.edu.au/mac/Media/>).

On the demand side, *it cannot be taken for granted that funding will be readily available*. In times of budgetary hardship, the knowledge functions of government are among the first cutback targets. The major private funders of think tanks are moving from generic to project-based funding (see McGann 2004), and many international organisations are now much fussier, choosier clients. Just like lobbyists engage in 'forum shopping', policy-makers and other clients/funders of think tank activities engage in 'ideas shopping'? Their shopping lists are possibly more volatile, more susceptible to trends and fads than before. This being the case, think tanks are now under greater pressure to be flexible in their areas of expertise, and to combine capacity for solid, long-term study with one for 'short-track' and 'quick response' idea brokerage.

Third, *there is no longer such thing as self-evidently authoritative knowledge*. A mere claim to the academic reputation of its authors or the rigor of the methods used to produce it, is insufficient to convince people who do not support the policy implications of any particular study. They will not hesitate to draw on the now commonplace post-postivist/postmodern critique of science and rationality in policy-making to undercut it, or to fight it with equally impressive looking studies they themselves commissioned. Many policy controversies today give rise to media-amplified 'wars of reports'. Being effective in these battles of

persuasion is not a matter of making sure one's facts are straight but rather of 'unscientific' matters such as framing findings into stories that 'catch on' by using the right language, launching them at the right time, and involving the right mix of players.

Packaging has thus become as important as content, if not more so, to achieve policy relevance. These conditions for impact lead to a blurring of the boundaries between think tanks and straightforward policy advocates and lobbyists, which is particularly prevalent in the Anglo-Saxon world (Stone and Denman 2004). High-quality messages do not necessarily get prominent play, and it may take considerable simplification of content to achieve it – at the risk of it degenerating into a self-defeating exercise. As Osborne (2004) observes succinctly: 'One of the dilemmas of think tankery is that you can either say something sensible, practical and useful and have six civil servants and their dog read it, or you can say something spectacularly silly and have the media cover it'. This becomes a dilemma when, as a director of an Australian think tank recently commented 'if you can't get the press all over it, your report is dead in the water'.

This would leave think tanks between the rock and the hard place of professional integrity without an audience versus capturing attention by opportunistic sloganism. Pressure to maintain simplicity and above all brevity comes from the reality of information overload in contemporary modern societies, and certainly so in the nerve centres of public policy-making. Thorough studies tend to be long and detailed, and are therefore in ever-increasing danger of being ignored. Think tanks that do not seek and find low-threshold, easy to consume formats of communicating findings and ideas cannot hope to be influential. Memos, briefing notes, video imagery, power breakfasts: these are but a few of the formats involved. They all share one trait, they force people who have a lot to say to compress their message readily. Not every expert is willing or able to do so.

Fourth, *think tankery is an increasingly internationalised activity*. This applies to both the scope and the mode of knowledge production and idea brokerage of think tanks. In an

era where international benchmarking has become commonplace, policy-makers no longer regard comparisons with and examples from abroad as esoteric digressions from the main message. They have come to expect and value them, and look less kindly on think tanks that do not 'broaden the horizon' in this fashion. Moreover, most of the well-established think tanks are increasingly establishing links with their international peers. Some do so to form transnational consortiums in order to be eligible for grants offered by supranational institutions in new knowledge markets such as the European Union (EU) or the World Bank (Sherrington 2000b; Struyk 2002). Others purposefully seek to gain a position in the burgeoning market for idea brokerage around new, transnational nodes of governance such as the EU or certain international environmental and trade regimes (Ullrich 2004). The big American think tanks have started opening offshore branches in emerging, non-western markets, and the organisational model of the main US and German think tanks have also been copied in other nations (Stone 2000b; Thunert 2000).

Stone (2002) likens the developments to a transnational 'think tank bandwagon.' Traditionally national think tanks that do not jump on board or fail to develop a degree of cross-national comparative sophistication or to tap into an international network of relevant centres of expertise, run the risk of being written off even locally as 'too parochial' – an important message for the bulk of comparatively insular Australian think tanks.

Fifth, as argued above, in contemporary network societies, policy-making evolves more and more around organising interactions and shaping discourses. *Process and access matter as least as much as content, if not more*. 'Knowledge transfer' can be an important by-product of process-management activities, but the key to being influential in the policy process is to have a hand in them – through idea brokerage as discussed above – not so much in having a thorough set of arguments at one's disposal (Abelson 2006). One may wonder if first generation, classic think tanks have come to terms with this reality. Certainly in northwestern

Europe, many established think tanks remain wedded to the ‘thorough research – thick report – big press conference’ model of selling policy ideas. Their branding remains focused on their scientific quality.

In the Anglo-Saxon world, including to some extent Australia, this model has been overshadowed by the rise of think tanks whose branding focuses on their commitment to a particular type of public ideas, and who are closely aligned to particular stakeholders and advocacy coalitions. They derive their influence from a revolving door relationship to the government, with regular rotation of personnel or otherwise close personal ties to certain rulers. This helps them be influential, but it is doubtful whether it helps them to remain innovative and free-thinking, which, after all, is what most think tanks pride themselves on. (Sherrington (2000a:261) remarks: ‘One of the most significant costs of think-tank activity in Britain has been the repercussions of “ideological fellowship”... By creating such a cosy setting, think tanks and the political actors could easily overlook the counter- and prevailing sentiment.’ Hence both the ‘academic’ and the ‘political’ strategies for gaining authority largely ignore the imperatives of the network society and its need for brokers, mediators, connection-makers and other process experts, who are not necessarily content-heavy, and certainly not partisan parti-pris.

To sum up, think tanks in and beyond Australia will increasingly need to rely on their own ingenuity in grasping the opportunities for small, flexible, low-budget, networked idea brokerage which modern technology offers and new practices of organising knowledge-intensive public deliberation. Hence the ideal-typical 21st century think tank:

- has a small core yet is connected to a large and pluralistic network of experts, partners, funders, users and mini-publics;
- unites traditional ‘thinkers’ and ‘experts’ with ‘idea brokers’ and ‘process managers’;
- routinely transcends disciplinary, sectoral and jurisdictional boundaries in all aspects of its modus operandi;

- produces conventional reports as well as information packages tailored to busy decision-makers;
- also organises encounters, experiences, and other mobilising and enabling events designed to facilitate the production, exchange and probing of innovative policy ideas; and
- has a marked presence in the world of the powerful but eschews dependencies on any or all of them.

Think tanks have the potential to thrive in a world in which ‘government’ has a lessened grip on national public policy agendas, and multi-party, horizontal, trans-boundary ‘governance’ arrangements proliferate (see also Schneider 2003; Ladi 2005; Braml 2006; Stone 2007). Throughout this article, we have repeatedly likened the process of putting forward ideas for public policy to the operation of a market. Yet this analogy only goes so far, for various reasons. First, as Stone and Denman (2004) show, it would be a mistake to underestimate the continuing influence of national political structures and traditions in shaping and constraining think tankery. The American separation of powers and the odd combination of technocracy and hyperpluralism that marks the EU provide a favourable habitat for a wide range of think tank activity, which arguably strengthens both the democratic quality of policy deliberation and the system’s capacity to address long-term and/or publicly controversial issues in sensible and creative ways. For democracy to realise its potential as the most intelligent system of rule (Lindblom 1965), a diversity of voices is crucial, as well as institutions that increase the likelihood that the debate between these voices is well-informed.

This leads into the second limit of the marketplace metaphor. Unfortunately, even in pluralist systems such as the US, the political culture can turn against science-driven, open argumentation. As McGann (2005) observes ‘[the] marketplace of ideas has been transformed into an uncivil war of ideas between conservative and liberal ideologues. Think tanks and their scholars are becoming the latest casualties in

this ground war. Think tanks, long recognised for their independent analysis, are now at risk of losing their credibility and independence as they get drawn into and polarised by this conflict.' This is because partisan politics creates a situation where there is little or no interest in balanced analysis because if a group does not lend unquestioned support on an issue, the group is thought to be an ally of the 'enemy'.

The narrowing of intellectual space around big policy issues is not a uniquely American phenomenon. Wherever ideological polarisation, executive dominance or media concentration go unchecked, deliberative opportunities in the public space are diminished or rendered trivial. Independent research and critical thinking suffer as a consequence. Genuine think tanks will need to resist pressures for self-censorship and ideological correctness which this entails. The problem is of course that, at least in the case of the US, the transformation of the ideas marketplace into an ideas war is partly driven by hard-line advocacy groups posing as think tanks.

With the label 'think tanks' unprotected, there is a clear need for a more rigorous vetting of their modus operandi and influence. In this regard, it is disappointing to see that the academic community studying think tanks has not yet succeeded in evolving a widely agreed upon conceptualisation and typology to be used for comparative research. This would be an important challenge for future students of the phenomenon. Also, in Australia and anywhere outside North America we need more systematic empirical studies of think tanks' impacts, whether through classic/positivist or through emerging/post-positivist lenses. The latter will focus on the question if and how think tanks succeed in framing public policy debates and how they position themselves as part of discourse coalitions; the former will focus more on if and how think tank activities are instrumental in shaping public policy agendas, and in supplementing governmental policy capacity. Although proponents of both lenses continue to fight epistemological and methodological battles, there is clearly a need for both their distinctive contributions in the world of think tank research. Additionally, we need more sys-

tematic evaluations of think tanks, which take an even-handed look at their contribution to the knowledge base and ideational content of public policy as well as the overall deliberative quality of national and trans-national governance systems.

Endnote

1. Thanks to one of our anonymous referees for elaborate and useful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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