CAPTURING THE POLITICAL IMAGINATION
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Think Tanks and the Policy Process

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Department of Politics and International Studies
University of Warwick
For Roy and Pauline
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This book has taken far too long — over four years — to write. Accordingly I have many debts to acknowledge. I am very grateful to friends and colleagues at the Australian National University, Murdoch University and the Manchester Metropolitan University who have given me support and encouragement: Tomoko Akami, Jillian Bavin-Mizzi, Frances Daly, Lorraine Elliott, Gillie Kirk, and Halina Zobel-Zubrzycka in Australia, and in the UK, Shafquat Nasir, Gail Hawkes, Kate McGowan and Caroline Ukoumunne. In Australia, my research and writing has benefited from the helpful comments on drafts of my manuscript from John Hart, Martin Painter and Patrick Weller. Beryl Radin at Rockefeller College, University of Albany, in the USA also provided me with useful suggestions and Kent Weaver at the Brookings Institution was helpful early on in providing me with material. I am also grateful to the Australian National University for providing me with the resources to undertake the research on this book. Additionally, since 1994 the Economic and Social Research Council of the UK has generously allowed me the time to finalise my writing on this study of think-tanks through their Research Fellowship scheme. Finally, I am very grateful to Richard Higgott who read everything several times with considerable patience and forbearance.
**Abbreviations**

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>AEI</td>
<td>American Enterprise Institute</td>
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<td>AIPR</td>
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<td>ASI</td>
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<td>Center for Security and International Studies</td>
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<td>Employee Benefit Research Institute</td>
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<td>European Policy Forum</td>
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IIE Institute for International Economics
IISS International Institute for Strategic Studies
IPPR Institute for Public Policy Research
IPR Institute for Pacific Relations
IPS Institute for Policy Studies
IR international relations
IRET Institute for Research on the Economics of Taxation

NAPA National Academy of Public Administration
NBER National Bureau of Economic Research
NCPA National Center for Policy Analysis
NCPPR National Center for Public Policy Research
NIESR National Institute for Social and Economic Research
NPO non-profit organisation

OCPU Outer Circle Policy Unit
ODC Overseas Development Council
ODI Overseas Development Institute

PERC Political Economy Research Center
PPI Progressive Policy Institute
PSI Policy Studies Institute

RFF Resources for the Future
RISCT Research Institute for the Study of Conflict and Terrorism
RIIA Royal Institute of International Affairs
RSF Russell Sage Foundation

SAU Social Affairs Unit
SMF Social Market Foundation

TPRC Trade Policy Research Centre

WPI World Policy Institute
WRI World Resources Institute
Time Line of British and American Think-tanks

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<td></td>
<td>1911</td>
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<td>1914</td>
<td>Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs</td>
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<td>Conference Board Institute for Government Research (joined into Brookings)</td>
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1934 National Planning Association
1937 Tax Foundation
National Institute for Economic and Social Research 1938
Catholic Institute for International Relations 1940
1942 Committee for Economic Development
Economic Research Council 1943 American Enterprise Institute
Federal Trust 1945
1948 RAND Corporation
World Policy Institute
1950 Aspen Institute
Bow Group 1951
1952 Resources for the Future
Institute of Economic Affairs 1955 Foreign Policy Research Institute
International Institute of Strategic Studies
Institute of Race Relations 1958
1959 Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions
Overseas Development Institute 1960
1961 Atlantic Council of the United States
Hudson Institute
Potomac Institute (disbanded 1991–92)
1962 Center for Strategic and International Studies
Group Research Inc.
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| | | Northeast-Midwest Institute
| | | The International Center
| | | Women's Research and Education Institute
| Policy Studies Institute | 1978 | Employee Benefit Research Institute
| | | Lincoln Institute
| | | Manhattan Institute
| | | Reason Foundation
| Arab Research Centre | 1979 | Center for the Study of Social Policy
| | | Claremont Institute
| | | Institute for Defense and Disarmament Studies
| | | Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy
| Social Affairs Unit Institute for European Defence and Strategic Studies Centre for Policy on Ageing | 1980 | Political Economy Research Center
| Council for Arms Control | 1981 | Atlas Foundation
| | | Center for National Policy
| | | Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
| | | Institute for International Economics
| | | Institute on Religion and Democracy
| | | National Institute for Public Policy
| | | Roosevelt Center for American Policy Studies
| | | National Center for Public Policy Research
| | | Washington Institute for Values in Public Policy (disbanded)
| | | World Resources Institute
| | | Basic Income Research Group now known as Citizens Income Public Finance Foundation | 1984 | Capital Research Center
| | | Center for Democracy
| | | Competitive Enterprise Institute
| | | Economic Policy Institute
| | | George C Marshall Institute
| | | Heartland Institute
| | | Mid America Institute
TIME LINE OF BRITISH AND AMERICAN THINK-TANKS

David Hume Institute 1985
Environmental and Energy Study Institute
Independence Institute
Institute for Research on the Economics of Taxation
Washington Institute for Near East Policy
Washington Institute for Policy Studies

Panos 1986
Drug Policy Foundation
IPSET
East-West Forum
Institute for African Alternatives
Foundation for Research on Economics and the Environment
Institute of Business Ethics
Hannibal Hamlin Institute
New Economics Foundation
Institute for Global Security Studies
South Carolina Policy Council

1987
Institute for American Values
James Madison Institute
Mackinac Center
Pacific Institute
Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research
Wisconsin Public Policy Research Institute
Yankee Institute for Public Policy Studies

Institute for Public Policy Research 1988
Barry Goldwater Institute
Institute of Employment Rights
Center for Security Policy
Commonwealth Foundation for Public Policy Alternatives

Institute of Employment Rights 1989
Henry L. Stimson Center
Social Market Foundation
Institute for Energy Research
Research Institute for the Study of Conflict and Terrorism
Indiana Policy Review Foundation
Saferworld
Monterey Institute
Progressive Policy Institute
Texas Public Policy Foundation

Centre for Global Energy Studies 1990
Acton Institute
Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine
Economic Strategy Institute
John Locke Foundation
Institute on Religion and Public Life
Madison Center for Educational Affairs

1991
Empire Foundation
Introduction: 
Knowledge, Influence 
and Agency in Policy

Ideas matter. It is also the case that ideas do not matter. If the intellectual weight of ideas alone were sufficient to influence political thinking, then the organisations that are the subject of this book might not exist. Ideas need organisations to propel them within the hearing range of decision-makers. Organisational infrastructure plays a significant role in the influence of ideas alongside the individual agents of ideas – scholars and intellectuals. Accordingly this book argues that independent policy research institutes – better known as think-tanks – have become increasingly visible policy actors. They attempt to participate directly in policy-making through the provision of analysis for policy-makers and more indirectly by fashioning ideas in ways to mould public understanding of issues and problems. Outlining what policy research institutes are, what they do, why they have proliferated and how they make ideas matter in policy circles are aspects of this argument.

Think-Tanks and Policy Inquiry

Although one step removed from formal political arenas, policy research institutes are involved in political activity and public policy in a variety of ways. They move ideas into politics. By attracting leading scholars, think-tanks provide a base from which to market, package and popularise ideas and policy proposals. They provide a platform for the views of those not directly involved in decision making such as senior corporate executives and academics. They are also involved in various forms of public education by holding conferences, providing press releases and organising briefings. Yet, think-tanks fall outside of traditional definitions of politics. Most public policy texts fail to discuss think-tanks as either a source of policy innovation or as a group of organisations that seek to inform policy. Yet, it would seem pertinent for think-tanks to be assessed in terms of agenda setting (Kingdon, 1984) or where they fit in the
literature on policy communities (Richardson and Jordon, 1979). Studies of advice systems have rarely discussed these institutes (for example, Plowden, 1987). Until recently the knowledge utilisation literature has not considered the role of policy institutes (Weiss, 1992c). Analyses of intellectual movements usually consider a group of think-tanks as an institutional expression of a broad movement such as the so-called New Right (for example, Gamble, 1989b: ch. 2). In most ruling-class studies, there is only passing reference to think-tanks and their impact on policy (Hoover and Plant, 1987). There is a tendency to treat these organisations as epiphenomena. Consequently a chasm exists between the self-aggrandising literature that think-tanks often produce in their annual reports and a lack of serious analysis from other observers.

Think-tanks are an organisational expression of the blending of ideas, politics and policy outside formal political arenas. The confluence of these elements in institutions other than the executive and legislature warrants further investigation. The separation of the public and the private in many standard political analyses undermines the requirement to address the role played by these non-governmental organisations which occupy an ambiguous position between the market and the state. This book looks at what happens at the ‘margins’ of government in the two liberal democratic political systems of the USA and Great Britain. It investigates the benefits and disadvantages of this sphere as a base from which to inform policy. In this context the literature on non-profit organisations is useful. One objective is to draw a different set of linkages within the policy process by taking a position one step removed from government. New relationships appear and a different set of actors and institutions can be seen to play a vital role (Wyszomirski, 1989). Fundamental questions arise from a vantage point on the margins.

Because they are largely self governing, bodies on the margins threaten some of political theory with obsolescence. Concerns about elections, legislatures, chief executives and government departments have limited appeal if governments isolate much of what they do from these devices of control (Sharkansky, 1989: 82–3).

Policy institutes are on the margins of government but not in government. There is enormous scope for the investigation of the mechanisms that connect organisations on the margins of government with the conventional structures of government. While the approval of public policy remains with elected representatives and
appointed officials, governments draw upon outside sources of advice and information. Even so, the impact of think-tanks on policy is incomplete. Influence is limited to constructing a political agenda, developing policy alternatives and diffusing ideas to shape public understanding of issues. Elected decision-makers remain responsible for the selection and persistence of new ideas in policy. Furthermore, as subsequent chapters discuss, the influence of think-tanks is diffuse, variable, fluid, intangible and usually ephemeral. It is not a quantifiable power that policy institutes wield. Nor is it the case that all institutes at some point in their existence exert political influence.

The concept of epistemic communities, employed in part of this book, provides a fresh perspective on the role of think-tanks among groups of policy experts. An epistemic community is made up of a network of specialists from a variety of positions who share a common world view and seek to translate their beliefs into public policies and programmes. Think-tanks represent one type of organisation in which members of a community may be located. As an analytical tool it is in the early stages of conceptualisation and was only recently introduced to the public policy literature (see Rose, 1991; Bennett, 1992). The concept allows for the analysis of fluctuations and variations of think-tank influence by assessing the effectiveness of think-tanks as organisations in tandem with the motivations of the experts who work through them. Accordingly, think-tanks are most likely to affect political thinking and the climate of opinion on an issue when roused by an epistemic community. Policy institutes can help epistemic communities attract the patronage of decision-makers. Think-tanks highlight new problems in need of policy attention and then seek to gain legitimacy for such issues on public and governmental agendas. However, the ability of an epistemic community to shape policy agendas is never complete. Nor do think-tanks need to be dominated by epistemic communities to function. Aside from their best efforts to influence policy, think-tanks perform other educational and technical roles. Consequently, the objective of the book is not to provide case-studies of epistemic communities, but to use this and other policy network concepts of policy communities and discourse coalitions as devices to explain the policy relevance of think-tanks.

Structure and Approach

The book discusses British and American think-tanks. This approach allows some comparative insight and is a step towards establishing
why think-tanks have proliferated primarily in the US. It is remarkable, given the amount of research that has been devoted to American think-tanks, that there is a disinterest in comparative analysis. There has never been a case-study on the influence of the Royal Institute of International Affairs (RITA) in foreign policy to compare with the studies that have addressed the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) (*inter alia*, Schulzinger, 1984; Smoot, 1963; Shoup and Minter, 1977). To date, the opportunity to conduct a comparative study of the role and influence of the CFR and the RITA, both of which have common origins in the Versailles Peace Conference, has been missed. This kind of examination can reveal the political environment in which these organisations have been most powerful or relatively weak. Cultural and institutional factors such as the permeability of the American political system to outsiders and the impermanence of bureaucrats, the division of powers and the weakness of political parties along with a history of generous foundation and philanthropic support are important for explaining the proliferation of think-tanks in the USA, but do not explain the growing numbers of think-tanks in other countries. Comparative analysis reveals that think-tanks are not, as suggested by a few writers (*inter alia*, Alpert and Markusen, 1979; Weaver, 1989), unique to the American political system.

This book primarily addresses the ways in which policy institutes seek to contribute to the policy process while recognising that there are methodological difficulties in assessing the degree to which they actually affect policy. It is impossible to establish a causal link between the activities of think-tanks and policy outcomes. A particular policy and its implementation can rarely be attributed to the influence of one organisation. There are a variety of intermediary forces such as political parties, bureaucracies, interest groups and the media. Furthermore, think-tanks are not successful in all their activities or at all stages of the policy process. They have selective impact according to issue and circumstance, and are involved more in the innovation and diffusion of policy ideas than their adoption or implementation by governments. The complexities of the policy-making process create a gap between the inputs of policy institutes and the outputs of policy-making. It could also mean that think-tanks have zero impact. This hiatus prevents measurement of their impact.

One way to mitigate the problem of quantifying influence is by looking not at the *degree* of influence but at the role think-tanks see themselves playing, the contributions they make to the policy process and how, or if, these contributions are used. These are specific
questions of an empirical nature but the analysis originates on the margins of politics, not at the centre as would befit a study of non-profit institutes. Accordingly, the book relies heavily on primary material generated by think-tanks – their published products such as books, monographs, newsletters and annual reports as well as unpublished material such as internal memoranda. In addition, the book draws on over ninety interviews that were conducted in think-tanks in the USA and Britain.

The first half of the book deals with the growth and organisation of think-tanks. The second half addresses the question of influence – whether they have the power to influence policy and in what form it is exerted. There is an unavoidable limitation on the number of organisations that can be assessed in detail. In the USA, there are hundreds of think-tanks. Consequently, some of the leading organisations are given more attention than others. There is, for example, more written about the Brookings Institution, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and the RAND Corporation than most remaining US organisations combined. British institutes are far less numerous and are more easily included in the analysis. However, for reference purposes, the Appendix provides data on a representative number of policy institutes.

Chapter one reviews the literature on think-tanks and the dilemmas of definition. Previous definitions are discarded in favour of the identification of a set of common features or characteristics that can be employed to identify think-tanks and distinguish them from other research and policy related organisations. The term is so well established in the popular mind that it cannot be discarded but it is employed in a specific sense as an alternative term for what I define as an ‘independent policy research institute’. These institutes are categorised as either ‘old guard’ or ‘new partisan’ in character. Chapter two surveys the existing literature on independent policy research institutes. Pluralists, elite theorists and Marxists, among others, present different pictures of think-tanks. Each perspective has its merits but also its disadvantages.

Although a think-tank boom has occurred internationally, the political, legal and cultural conditions in the USA present a more fertile environment for think-tank growth. Accordingly, chapter three outlines some reasons for the differences in scale of the think-tank industry between the Britain and the USA. Chapters four and five turn inwards on think-tanks. Different from both private and public sector organisations, they face a set of problems peculiar to the non-profit organisation. In order to survive and prosper in a changing world,
think-tanks must constantly learn and adapt. The organisational health of a think-tank is a significant factor in its potential for policy relevance and influence.

Chapter six locates the think-tank phenomenon – the scholars and others that inhabit them and the ideas, tactics and proposals that are generated – in an epistemic community framework. Research institutes are 'key locations' for these intellectual activists (Haas, 1992a: 31). They are a medium through which to set agendas, confine debate to safe issues, and induce policy learning. Epistemic communities need not necessarily operate through these organisations but policy institutes potentially work best when dominated by or linked with an epistemic community. Chapter seven turns to the main theme of the remainder of the book – the influence and policy impact of think-tanks. Chapter eight critically analyses the research brokerage and networking activities of policy institutes in their efforts to inform policy. As policy entrepreneurs in the guise of charitable educational institutions but engaged in advocacy and research brokerage, their influence lies in their ability to raise issues to the public agenda and to build a receptive audience to new ideas. Chapter nine further investigates the style of think-tank advocacy by discussing the 'war of ideas', that is, the discursive tactics employed by think-tanks to make certain ideas or policy proposals politically attractive. The argument is extended in Chapter ten by looking at the way some market liberal think-tanks have been responsible for establishing public choice theory as a key framework for interpreting policy concerns. Chapter eleven focuses on privatisation to exemplify how think-tanks can promote policy learning. Free market think-tanks were extolling the virtues of privatisation long before its popularity with governments in the 1980s. Their research brokerage activities have promoted the international spread of privatisation.

The final two substantive chapters change tack and address aspects of influence among foreign policy institutes. The presence of think-tanks in this field since the turn of century presents a unique opportunity to map not only the changing forms of think-tanks over time but also the ways in which they have contributed to the development of an academic discipline, the extent to which they have, or have not, been significant actors in international affairs and the manner in which they have bridged the divide between the worlds of the analyst and the practitioner.

In conclusion, the book reaffirms the role that ideas can play in policy debates. This is not to say, however, that all think-tanks play a
part in the policy process. It is easy to exaggerate the importance of these organisations and dangerous to accept uncritically their own statements of influence. Furthermore, it would be unwarranted to assume that information and ideas are essential to decision-making, particularly when interests have a strong role in policy development. Nevertheless, think-tanks are shown to be a contemporary mode of interaction between the world of scholarship and inquiry and the domain of policy-making. In a world where knowledge, information and expertise is burgeoning, think-tanks are an increasingly important mechanism for filtering and refining such resources in a relevant and usable manner.

In both countries, they are strategic institutions that make ideas more competitive in an environment characterised by multiple and conflicting sources of advice and analysis.


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Center for Security Policy – CSP (1990) 1990 Annual Report,
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