

Think Tanks, Foundations and Policy Discourse: Ebbs and Flows, Investments and Responsibilities

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Introduction

Many observers have expressed concern about the apparent influence of conservative think tanks on contemporary public policy in the United States and elsewhere, not only by their ubiquity in the media, but also by defining the terms and scope of public debate (Rich, 2004). Worry has recently emerged in Canada that similar dynamics and strategies have been set in motion with respect to sharper and more aggressive political discourse and the significant budget reductions to Canadian Policy Research Networks, Law Commission of Canada, and Canadian Labour and Business Centre. Together, such developments have been depicted as a narrowing of “public space” for policy debates.

This paper seeks to put these concerns and challenges into perspective. Political and ideological rhetoric can be biting and even demeaning, and government decisions can often be abrupt, even catastrophic to particular organizations and programs. But it helps to understand that there are larger currents and dynamics in motion, including historical ebbs and flows of ideas and popular sensibilities, building and then crashing like waves onto political and institutional shores years or decades after they were set in motion. Moreover, a systems perspective suggests that there is always a great deal of resilience among many public, private and non-profit institutions in our governance systems (Simon, 1969). Such perspectives should lead to interpretations of recent developments against longer time horizons in the past and the future, and they should also allow for a more strategic dialogue on how to see setbacks more as “pruning” as well as opportunities and motivation to make shrewder investments in research and to grow and lever capabilities in newer and more productive directions. It also suggests that the responsibility for supporting the work of think tank organizations with certain values should not solely be the responsibility of governments.

This paper aims to facilitate a strategic dialogue on where to make new investments in think tanks in three ways. The first part of the paper puts the recent surge in the number and media presence of conservative thinkers and commentators in historical perspective by reminding readers of the origins of think tanks in North America and longer waves and cycles of influence. The second part briefly introduces frameworks that capture the contemporary realities and dynamics of policy-making environment rife with contending values and beliefs, advocacy, policy conflict, and different kinds of policy inquiry. Together they suggest that broadly influencing the direction and “space” for policy debates is a multi-decade process, working at many levels, with many different roles and leverage points to consider, and, not surprisingly, comprising many uncertainties. The third part will encourage those seeking to strengthen the quality of public debate with data, research and policy analysis to carefully assess the sources of their consternation, to align future investments and strategies with those diagnoses, and to develop realistic views on the nature and likely impact of expanding research and dialogue capabilities in a more global, media-saturated and fluid political environment.

A few words are in order about my views. I was commissioned to prepare this paper because of my abiding interest in the evolution and strategies of think tanks and the dynamics of the policy-making process. I am not known as a supporter of left-wing or right-wing causes, but I do attach considerable value to informed, productive and vigorous debates on policy matters, and my writing has often explored the capacity of both government and non-governmental actors to design policy interventions and manage consultative processes. I have typically written about think tanks in Canada as a class of organizations, never singling out any one as an exemplar because of the values they hold, but marveling about their diversity with respect to values, analytic methodologies, target audiences, membership, funding base, and communications. I have depicted them as intriguing, high-profile and yet often precarious organizations. Ultimately, I believe that good think tank performance is about entrepreneurialism and building robust institutions in difficult environments, which can take extraordinarily different forms. The ultimate standard against which I have assessed their relevance derives from my broader interests in public policy and governance: how well would their work inform the strategy and priorities of a new government, regardless of their political orientation? Values are not enough; governance and productive public debate in a sustainable democratic system requires angling towards workable strategies, policies and delivery arrangements.

1. Recent Developments in Historical Perspective

Much of the current concern about the balance and funding in think tank funding and the nature of public discourse derives from the election of the Harper government in Canada. The government is led by a Prime Minister who is articulate and has strong core values, worked closely with and received advice from fiscal and social conservatives who believe in freer markets and market solutions to social problems, less interference by the national government in areas of provincial jurisdiction, a more robust foreign policy and closer ties to the United States, and the list could be extended. Harper and his circle of advisors apparently received advice from conservative strategists in the United States and Australia before the election, where public debates are sharper and more aggressive. Recent decisions to eliminate funding for the Court Challenges program, Canadian Policy Research Networks, the Law Commission of Canada, and the Canadian Labour and Business Centre, among other decisions, were also noteworthy for the language used in making the announcements. They did not seem like initiatives intended only to improve “value-for-money for taxpayers,” but rather, as overt efforts to demean or weaken voices that might be critical of the government. There is worry that, if the Harper government is returned to power with a majority, more aggressive steps might be taken to bolster certain views and weaken or discount others.

Such worries and interpretations are understandable in some quarters, but it is important to have some historical perspective. First, the recent ascendancy of fiscal and social conservatives in terms of political power and discourse at the national level can be seen as the culmination of thirty years’ worth of effort. Second, and related, the investment of time and energy in institutions, strategies and language by conservatives was driven by worry and even disdain about what they saw as the hegemony of liberal and non-market

perspectives guiding academic and political discourse, which had dominated government institutions and public deliberation for many decades. Moreover, they were concerned about the incoherence of their own perspectives and inability to project them to larger publics. For those seeking to change the terms and nature of policy discourse, there are key lessons to be learned from even a short history of the context, rise, and evolution of think tanks in the United States, and then we can consider Canadian developments.

The multi-faceted origins of think tanks. It is often forgotten that the rise of early think tanks in the United States were contemporaneous with the Progressive Era and early social reforms, a growing interest in competent and non-partisan public service institutions for municipal and later higher orders of government, and the arrival of the first social science disciplines in universities, precursors to the first national think tanks, and private foundations (see, *inter alia*, Critchlow, 1985; Rich, 2004). For our purposes, what was most interesting was the cross-over between these different currents of activity. Many early academics were heavily involved in the reform movements of this era, and were certainly not perceived as neutral experts (Furner, 1975). The early foundations – such as Rockefeller, Russell Sage, and Carnegie foundations – along with private philanthropy provided support for research in support of better government and for early think tanks like the Institute on Government Research (later the Brookings Institution), the Bureau of Municipal Research, and the National Bureau of Economic Research (Anderson, 2003; Rich, 2005). Though often celebrated as the arrival of “expert” research to inform decision-making (Critchlow, 1985), we should not forget that these new institutions were challenges to established interests and ways of conducting business inside and outside government, effectively purveyors of a modernization agenda. Indeed, Lisa Anderson persuasively suggests that the social sciences were born “as handmaidens of democracy and industrial capitalism of the American state” (Anderson, 2003: 3), and so too were the earliest think tanks and foundations.

Think tanks and the rise of the modern welfare state. The mobilization and aftermath of World War II led to the proliferation and institutionalization of social science disciplines predicated on curiosity-driven research, and yet expertise and planning advice was in demand, accelerated by the growth of government budgets and the willingness to experiment with large-scale investments in social and science programs. Such growth was handled by a steady increase in the number of centers at universities standing outside the now traditional disciplines, typically relying on external funding. A greater number of non-governmental think tanks began to emerge during the 1960s and 1970s – the most notable were the RAND Corporation, Hudson Institute, Institute for Policy Studies, Urban Institute, American Enterprise Institute, and Brookings Institution. During the 1960s and early 1970s, what became known as the policy analysis movement took shape, with a proliferation of policy analysis and research capabilities in agencies across government and the emergence of the first professional schools dedicated to public policy universities (Wildavsky, 1979; Radin, 2000; Howlett and Lindquist, 2004; Anderson, 2003). For these reasons, it is important to observe that this proliferation of different institutions was contemporaneous with the rise of the modern welfare state under liberal principles. As Anderson observes “Whether or not the association of social science with liberalism is

to be welcomed, the fact of its existence must be acknowledged before it can be debated, deplored or defended” (Anderson, 2003: 108).

The new politics and the explosion of think tanks. Most readers will be well aware of the explosion in the number of think tanks in the United States over the last couple of decades. Andrew Rich, for example, reports that over 109 conservative think tanks alone had been established in the United States since the 1970s (Rich, 2004: 56), even though it remains remarkably difficult to define and categorize think tanks. However, there have been two important changes in the complexion of the US think tank scene: the rise of pure ideological or advocacy think tanks, espousing certain values and working aggressively to communicate those values and to implement them (Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute, etc.); and the emergence of what Abelson (2002) calls “vanity” or “legacy” think tanks, named after progenitors such as former presidents or other well-known political or business leaders. The proliferation of think tanks has been driven in part by wealth, the high-stakes nature of politics, and the lower barriers-to-entry due to modern information and Web-based technologies, which allow leaders the prospect of instant recognition with a good communicator as leader or a signature study due to the voracious needs of the media. There has also been a massive increase in the number of policy schools: there are scores, if not well over a hundred at US universities, which supply analysts for governments, think tanks, interest groups, associations, and consulting firms, but also scholars who regularly enter into the policy and political fray. More, generally, the post-9/11 era is a cut-throat media environment with hard-edged talk-shows, demanding “experts” or at least “talking heads” for any issue that arises. One result is that, regardless of the quality of some policy analysis and research from certain quarters, policy analysis and think tanks are clearly now seen as weapons in a high-stakes war of ideas and power, rather than as places for reflection, discussion, and bringing applied social science to bear on important policy questions.

The purpose of these high-level observations is to provide background against which we can consider the emergence and experience of the think tanks in Canada, and make some observations about their fortunes and the quality of public debate. We cannot, of course, provide a detailed history of Canadian think tanks in this paper, but this has been done elsewhere (Abelson, 2002; Lindquist, 1989, 2004). The short story is that, beyond having considerably less wealth and a governance system that is smaller and creates relatively fewer demands for external policy analysis and research, Canada, like other countries, has been influenced by, but typically lagged behind the United States with respect to think tanks and the developments noted above. Canada is distinctive from the United States because the first wave of institutes that appeared in the 1960s (and some much later) were at the instigation of governments and, despite a considerable proliferation of non-profit think tanks since the 1970s, there has been little support from the foundation sector.

Like the United States, the growth of government involvement in economic and social policy grew in the wake of World War II, and, in the 1960s, concerted efforts were made to increase the capacity of Canadian governments to undertake policy analysis and research. At the national level, not only did policy analysis units spring up in almost every department and agency, but arm’s length entities were established like the

Economic Council of Canada (1963), the Science Council of Canada (1966), the National Council of Welfare (1968), and the Law Reform Commission of Canada (1970). In contrast, the Institute for Research Public Policy (1972) was created outside government with federal funding because there were no equivalents to the Brookings Institution in the country. Other non-government organizations that were established included the Parliamentary Centre for Foreign Affairs (1968) and Vanier Institute for the Family (1965), the latter with foundation support.

The growth in government and the increased interest in public policy led to several existing non-profit organizations and associations to restructure, reorient or rename in order to become modern think tanks, including the Conference Board of Canada (1970), the Canadian Council on Social Development (1970), the CD Howe Research Institute (1973), and the Canadian Tax Foundation. Several new think tanks emerged: the Canada West Foundation (1973), the Fraser Institute (1974), the North-South Institute (1976), the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies (1976), the Canadian Institute for Economic Policy (1979), and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (1980). The 1980s were interesting because the federal government established the Canadian Institute for International Peace and Security (1984), and there was a failed attempt by conservatives to establish the National Foundation for Public Policy Development, really a precursor to the “unite-the-right” movement. Other think tanks that appeared included the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy (1981), the Pembina Institute (1985), the Mackenzie Institute (1986), the Public Policy Forum (1987), the Institute on Governance (1990), the Caledon Institute for Social Policy (1992), and the Pearson-Shoyama Institute (1993). The 1992 federal budget led to the disappearance of the ECC, SCC and LRC, but Canadian Policy Research Networks (1994) emerged out of the ashes of the ECC, and was also joined by the Atlantic Institute for Economic Policy (1994), the Centre for the Study of Living Standards (1995), and the Polaris Institute (1997). The Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development (1996) was established by the government in the non-profit sector and funded through contribution arrangements, though it was absorbed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade in 2001. More recent additions include the Frontier Centre for Public Policy (1999), the Montreal Economic Institute (2000), the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute (2001), and the Manning Centre for Building Democracy (2006).

Undoubtedly, the list above has not captured a host of specialized think tanks in different policy domains, but it shows that, although Canada has nowhere near the number of think tanks as the United States, there has been a great proliferation of think tanks since the early 1970s. While we do not have the space to delve into the history and orientation of each organization, let me assert that there is *considerable* variation with respect to the values, time horizons, target audiences, depth and diversity of expertise, size, public profile, and sources of funding (membership fees, foundation and government grants, endowments, etc.). Moreover, they have been joined by a rapidly expanding number of foundations, as well as specialized academic research units and professional schools of public policy and administration at universities across the country. With this high-level information in hand, I will pose and answer some general questions.

Has there been a shift in the mix of think tanks? It is now common to worry about an increase in the number of conservative think tanks in Canada. However, there has been a conservative think tank presence for many years with the Fraser Institute and arguably the Canada West Foundation and the CD Howe Institute, although definitions as to what constitutes “conservative” is in the eye of beholder. There can be no doubt that several conservative think tanks have been added to the mix since 1999. And, there have been the recent cuts in funding for Canadian Policy Research Networks and the Law Commission of Canada, and the possibility of extending this to other non-profit think tanks that rely heavily on project-specific support from the federal government. However, we should acknowledge that Canada still has a mix of think tanks at the national level, and considerably more than thirty years ago.

More independent think tanks, less government support? The recent cuts to CPRN and the Law Commission of Canada came as a shock, but were these actions a particularly conservative turn? These cuts are reminiscent of the 1992 federal budget decisions to eliminate the Economic Council, the Science Council, and the Law Reform Commission by a government that could not be described as neo-conservative but centrist by today’s standards. Interestingly, the stated rationale supplied by the federal government at the time was that the very increase in the number of think tanks *outside* government made it easier to justify such a decision, no matter what the real underlying motivations might have been. Although Liberal governments under Prime Minister Chrétien re-established the Law Reform Commission and provided funding for CPRN, it has been rare for any think tank, group or association to receive sustaining funding from the government since the early 1990s, and many were also significantly affected by the Program Review cuts.

Have think tank capabilities deepened? Three very different governments pointed to the proliferation of think tanks as a justification to cut funding to both government and non-profit think tanks, but was the depth of analysis and research actually replaced by non-government think tanks? There has been no systematic study to answer this question. I would argue that despite the proliferation of think tanks, with few exceptions they have limited resources and insufficient capabilities to challenge the analytic capabilities of public service institutions that advise governments with projects of the scale that, say, were undertaken by the Economic Council of Canada. Some think tanks – like the Howe Institute, IRPP and CPRN – have been able to secure sufficient funding to underwrite multi-volume research projects, but this is not the norm. This suggests that the role of most think tanks is to influence agenda-setting in the short and longer term on specific issues, and, in some cases, to promote and communicate certain values. However, such activity should not be confused with sustained, substantial policy analysis and research.

Where are the foundations? In great contrast to the United States, foundations have not been important sources of funding for Canadian think tanks, although they have not been insignificant. Family foundations have supported or given inspiration to think tanks: the CD Howe Memorial Foundation was merged with the Private Planning Association of Canada to create the CD Howe Research Institute in the early 1970s, but the former provides only a small stream of funds to the CD Howe Research Institute. The Vanier Institute for the Family is supported by a small foundation. The left-of-centre Canadian

Institute for Economic Policy was given a five-year mandate and funding from Walter Gordon. The Institute for Research on Public Policy is mainly supported by a significant endowment established by the Canadian government, with contributions from private sector firms and provinces. The Caledon Institute for Social Policy was founded with the support of the Maytree Foundation, which provides a significant part of its revenues. The Canadian Donner Foundation and the Max Bell Foundation have long provided support to a variety of domestic and international causes, including right-of-centre think tanks.¹ It would require a significant study to track down the other major foundations in Canada and determine whether equivalent funds have been given to these and other think tanks, and, to be balanced, such a study should also assess the extent of revenue received from government agencies as part of the mix. However, most community and family foundations have focused on providing support for front-line service delivery innovations and perhaps for some seed-research projects by think tanks; they do not constitute a major stream of funds for most think tanks in Canada.

It has been my experience that all think tank leaders, no matter the source and level of their funding, believe their organizations to be precarious and lonely beacons in a sea of institutions that focus on and support other values, issues, and audiences. In other words, many right-of-centre think tanks would point to the stream of government funds that left-of-centre and centrist think tanks have received over the year for projects and sometimes sustaining support. On the other hand, one can understand the worry of social policy and centre-left think tanks: they see the arrival of a new Conservative government followed by recent cuts to two prominent think tanks, the emergence of several new conservative think tanks, and coordinated foundation funding as well as overt strategic thinking from the Manning Centre on how to align conservative causes. Although the diversity of think tanks in Canada remains, along with thinness in systematic policy analysis and research, has meant that there certainly has been a shift in the governance and funding playing fields. In the next section we take a closer look at perspectives on how this dynamic works.

¹ In 2005, for example, among many other causes the Canadian Donner Foundation supported, it provided general and/or project-specific support to the Fraser Institute, CD Howe Institute, Frontier Centre for Public Policy, Montreal Economic Institute, and Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute. See “Selected Grants 2005” at www.donnerfoundation.org/tocframe.html. The Max Bell Foundation recently provided grants to the Canada West Foundation, the Howe Institute, the Montreal Economic Institute, the Fraser Institute, Pollution Probe, and the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies. See “Current Grants” at www.maxbell.org/grantslist.htm.

2. Perspectives on Values, Policy Networks, and Change

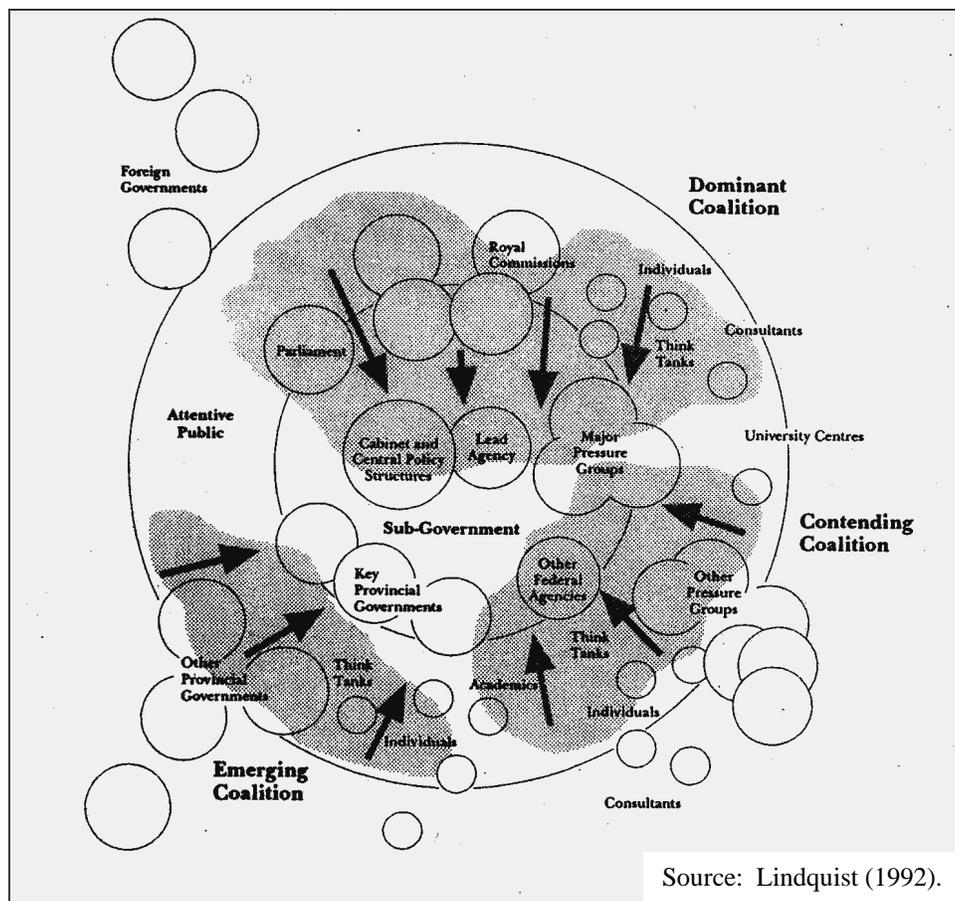
How can we sharpen our views on the ebb and flow of policy-making and how think tanks achieve influence and perhaps thrive or atrophy in these shifting contexts? Few would dispute that policy deliberation and design, as well as program implementation, now proceeds in a more distributed context, even if the capabilities of public service institutions typically remain superior to non-governmental actors. Compared to, say, 20 years ago, there is considerably more expertise dispersed in interest groups and associations, consulting firms, think tanks, and universities.

When scholars and, for that matter, most public service executives, assess how policy gets made and the challenges confronting specific sectors, they typically do not focus only on one or two principal organizations; rather, they consider the entire constellation of organizations in a policy network or community (Lindquist, 1992). When think tank leaders and foundations consider “investing” in certain initiatives, they increasingly do so with the evolving ecology of capabilities as well as the shifting dynamics of larger policy communities in mind (Lindquist, 2000). Policy scholars have developed some useful frameworks to capture the attributes, capabilities and dynamics of policy communities. We cannot review these frameworks in detail, but the work of Sabatier and Pross provide useful points of departure (see Figure 1, next page).

Values and beliefs are pervasive. It is well-known that values and beliefs are important features of political life and policy struggles. Indeed, Paul Sabatier (1987) introduced the advocacy coalition framework that depicted policy debates as a struggle between clusters of different kinds of actors with similar or shared values and belief systems, which he calls “advocacy coalitions.” Although misinterpreted by many, Sabatier’s notion of advocacy coalitions are not intended to mean “political coalitions”; rather, they are best thought of as a loosely or tightly coupled constellation of actors, consisting not only of government agencies across levels of government, but also key interest groups, associations, think tanks, and even journalists with similar values and beliefs. The implication is that some government agencies, interest groups, associations, think tanks, and journalists might belong to other advocacy coalitions. Sabatier suggests that, at any time, there are two to four definable advocacy coalitions in a policy sub-system, with a dominant one defining key policies. *He presumes that deep normative values and beliefs are primary drivers of reliance and investments in certain types and sources of policy analysis, research, and other information, and thus anticipated that relatively little unaligned policy work gets done in policy communities, although he envisioned a role for relatively dispassionate social scientists to test the claims and solutions offered by analysts and academics associated with different advocacy coalitions.* Despite the rivalries and struggles among coalitions, and notwithstanding external perturbations (see below), Sabatier predicts these normative contours remain stable over long periods of time, typically a decade or two.

Policy monopolies usually dominate policy communities. Paul Pross (1986) suggested that policy communities and policy areas were governed or shaped by a dominant policy regime – that is, a set of policies, certain types of governing instruments, and a few dominant players inside and outside government that shaped and continue to wield or benefit from those policies and instruments. Pross has referred to such dominant actors as the “sub-government,” but others have since called them “policy monopolies” (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). *Along with beliefs, this investment in the existing policy regime builds an element of inertia into these sub-systems, resisting the criticisms and ideas from those inside and outside government not aligned with those interests.* Sub-governments or policy monopolies can take different shapes, depending on the policy domain in question. The relative distribution of authority, expertise, and coordination between state and society actors can vary considerably. Several scholars have identified different kinds of policy networks with different distributions of power, coordination and expertise inside and outside government (Atkinson and Coleman, 1989; Lindquist, 1992; Kickert *et al.*, 1997). When a dominant coalition is displaced by the arrival of a new government at the system level, there can be huge implications for the trajectory of a policy regime, and for the actors inside and outside the government associated with it.

Figure 1. Policy Communities and Advocacy Coalitions



Conflict and threat are important motivators. Sabatier (1987) takes simple ideas from the theory of learning and suggests that threat from competitors, failure, or the inability to reach attainment levels provides important signals to policy communities. He argues that investments in policy analysis and learning are motivated either by perceived threats or an interest in keeping ahead of competitors, in this case, other advocacy coalitions. *More interesting, though, is his notion that there can be either too little or too much conflict: in the case of the latter, there is little incentive to invest in new ways of looking at problems or policy solutions, and, with the latter, debate can degenerate into little more than opponents asserting values, questioning integrity, talking past each other, and not engaging in any sort of reasoned debate and perhaps the simple assertion of fiat to resolve policy conflict.* Indeed, Sabatier saw a role for “policy brokers” or relatively neutral experts (or organizations) that would evaluate different claims and moderate debates so they proceeded in more productive zones. This perspective provides an interesting interpretation of the notion of preserving “public space” for debate and suggests that one concern of some observers in Canada is that we might import US talk-show formats, which seems less about delving into issues, exploring the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to public policy, and finding common ground, and more about asserting positions, name-calling, and ratings.

Policy monopolies can change. Although policy communities typically remain stable over time, academic observers do not rule out the possibility of external shocks or crises dramatically affecting the distribution of power and the nature of existing policy regimes and networks (Pross, 1986; Sabatier, 1987; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). Indeed, these formulations suggest that developments in other policy domains, changes in government, scandals or policy failure of some kind, can have profound effects. The interesting point to consider, though, is that *if external shocks are sufficiently significant, there is heightened possibility that a dominant coalition may lose its monopoly within a policy community, and power will shift to a different advocacy coalition and perhaps lead to profound changes in a policy network, including the political leadership and even the public service leadership of key departments, as well as the adoption of new policy priorities.* This would likely be accompanied by a reflex to work with a different set of societal interests, including interest groups, associations, academic advisors, and think tanks considered to be part of the same advocacy coalition. Such disjunctures in policy communities are relatively rare, but when they do happen they can be very unsettling for many actors; much that is taken for granted is up for grabs.

Policy debates and challenges evolve over time. Policy communities encounter all sorts of challenges: most are routine, some are selective or incremental issues, and, as noted above, there can arise fundamental challenges to the underpinning of the existing policy regime or indeed new policy domains emerge (Lindquist, 1989, 2001). *The perhaps counter-intuitive finding from this perspective: when policy regimes are most under challenge, when a policy monopoly is threatened, and when debate is at its most public, these occasions may provide the best opportunities for contributions from think tanks and other actors in the attentive public.* Otherwise, there will be skirmishes around relatively circumscribed issues. This reinforces the notion that the more significant the “threats” to

actors in policy communities, the more powerful the incentives there are for investments in learning as well as opportunities to contribute to policy debates.

Influence usually obtains in the longer term. Sabatier (1987) taps into received wisdom of the knowledge utilization literature, and, following the seminal work of Carole Weiss, presumes that, typically, policy research has an enlightenment or percolation effect – that is, new ways of conceiving of issues and solutions to policy challenges rarely have direct impact or “influence” on policy-makers, but rather, work slowly and steadily to re-shape how observers and decision-makers frame, interpret, and address issues. Indeed, such a process operates through discussion, debate, and persuasion over considerable periods of time. Agenda-setting models (Kingdon, 1995) depict policy decisions as close to random or intermittent events, and conceive of solutions getting attached to problems for decision because they are deemed to be among the most worthy of options and the result of rolling debates and consensus of sorts among experts inside and outside government. *It is a rare occasion when an idea, solution or concept springs to the fore and instantly informs a change in policy direction.* Enlightenment is a primary channel because policy regimes and communities have considerable inertia and resistance to change, and new perspectives are gradually filtered through existing values and beliefs.

Each policy community is different. The above observations are generally fine, but every policy domain and community of actors is unique. Each sports a different distribution of power and authorities within and across levels of government, and a different distribution of expertise among firms, interest groups and associations, non-profits, academic research centers, and think tanks. And, while changes in government will affect the appointments of ministers and deputy ministers, governments typically have limited time and energy to fundamentally alter the underpinnings of every policy domain, except those constituting top priorities.² The kinds of debates and types of evidence that gets marshaled, as well as the range of government, university, and non-profit think tanks, tend to vary considerably across policy domains.

Internal stasis weakens coalitions. Sabatier’s formulation presumes that the incentive for new investments by elements of advocacy coalitions will come from external threat, but learning and scrutiny can also come from within (Lindquist, 1992). The arrival of a new government associated with one advocacy coalition has been depicted as a threat to many established interests or cause of misfortune, and undoubtedly it is. But the government’s very arrival can also be seen as the symptom of underlying weaknesses in the opposing advocacy coalitions. Much of the downsizing and restructuring of the 1990s were overdue changes because centre-left supporters had failed to deal squarely with policy ineffectiveness and growing failures; they generally refused to countenance challenge to their presumptions and world views, and the superiority of their values was self-evident; despite a rapidly changing environments, there was a failure to adjust rhetoric, scrutinize assumptions, and strategies.³ The door opened widely for dramatic change when deficits

² However, significant across-the-board decreases or increases in funding can reshape policy domains, and regardless of priorities, crises can divert and demand government attention.

³ This is similar to the processes described in Kuhn’s (1970) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*; it takes time for anomalies to build, and for old approaches to get discredited and new ones adopted.

got out of hand, and the ascendancy of the Harper government shows that this dynamic is playing out to this day. In my view, this was not a “take-over” from the right, but rather, insufficient self-critical thought by centre-left thinkers and organizations. It will take decades to rebuild confidence in government, which must build on new conceptions of governance and new programs of action (Lindquist, 1997). *Think tanks aligned with certain advocacy coalitions can have pivotal roles not simply in cheerleading for the tenets and espoused programs of advocacy coalitions but also in challenging them; and relatively unaligned think tanks can challenge or provide forums for debate and testing of claims from various actors from different coalitions.*

These observations will suggest that broadly influencing the direction and “space” for policy debates is a multi-decade process, working at many levels, with many different roles and leverage points to consider, and comprising many uncertainties. Indeed, the revival of conservative thinking in the United States, and now in Canada, is the product of several decade’s worth of mobilization. Continued success in terms of holding power at the national level in Canada is not assured, but there can be no doubt that the strides made by conservative forces have been considerable. Social and fiscal conservative leaders asked soul-searching questions in the 1970s about why they were losing political and policy debates, and began to systematically make investments in individuals and organizations, searched for build better arguments, cultivated networks of researchers and supporters (financial and political), and developed superior communications strategies and tactics.

With the exception of the Fraser Institute and key foundations, Canada has seemed on the periphery of these currents south of the border, but this reflection and mobilization has recently paid off in Canada. Sabatier suggests that advocacy coalitions will engage in policy-oriented learning and make the necessary investments when other coalitions try new strategies or there are fundamental shifts in the policy-making environment. The policy landscape has changed, and lessons can be learned from conservative strategies in recent years, and perhaps new ones need to be invented. What posture and strategies might be adopted by think tanks and foundations is the focus of Part 3 of this paper.

3. Strategic Implications and Expectations

The goal of this paper is to provide some perspective and concepts to inform discussions on how to make strategic investments in think tanks. I have suggested that it is natural that a new government managing a different set of priorities would solicit advice and support work from a different network of advisors inside and outside government; it is disconcerting, though, for centre-left policy actors because of the relative stability of specific policy regimes and communities over the years. Such shifts in power always lay bare existing patterns and linkages based on shared values and beliefs, and many groups benefited from those alignments. However, it is important to recognize that the decisions of the Harper government to cut funding to several think tanks underscore the precarious and difficult funding environments that many think tanks have always worked in; similar decisions were made by the Mulroney and Chrétien governments during the 1990s, and increasingly onerous accountability requirements for receiving grants and contributions from federal departments have made funding an even more daunting challenge.

While this round of discussion has been motivated by specific announcements about funding for specific think tanks, it is important to take a broader and longer view of the problem and possible solutions. It should involve asking hard questions about the willingness of centre-left interests and researchers to scrutinize their presumptions and to invest in research and analysis that asks tough questions and yields interesting findings (and the same should hold for the right as well!). Think tanks should be able to play an important role in this ongoing process of testing and renewal; to do so does not mean relinquishing values and commitment. By fostering better debate across advocacy coalitions, think tanks should contribute to the greater good, even if duly elected governments will strike balances in certain directions. In what follows, I offer some observations and suggestions to serve as a point of departure for dialogue among think tank and foundation leaders.

Government funding is risky and cumbersome. If one believes that national politics and governance is better served by vigorous and well-informed policy debates, then the intermittent recourse by governments to eliminate funding for certain types of think tanks dealing with policy issues should be a concern. The cost of making such changes to policy experts, organizations, and even taxpayers is considerable, particularly if their goal was to strengthen the quality of public debate with data, research and policy analysis. And, leaving aside normative matters, the costs to all think tanks that receive funding from the federal government has been compounded by the risk-averse manner in which grants and contributions are managed by departments and agencies. Even though there is some hope that the Blue Ribbon Panel on Grants and Contributions might suggest ways for the government to remedy this situation, it seems prudent for think tanks to seek alternative sources of funding. More market-oriented think tanks have a ready potential base of contributors and members from private firms and business associations, even if leaders always struggle to maintain or expand levels of funding. However, most social policy think tanks do not have such access, or at least have not aggressively pursued such sources. The academic granting councils typically find it difficult to support policy-oriented research because of disciplinary bias and long lead times. In this connection,

community and family foundations would seem natural sources of funding for a rolling set of projects: they could fill a “market failure” in the support of good research, many have a track record of making medium and longer term commitments to organizations, and often have leaner administrative requirements for disbursements than governments. While most Canadian foundations have not supported policy research in the manner of United States counterparts, this represents an overdue opportunity to remedy this imbalance.

Foundations can foster informed and productive policy debates. For many foundations and philanthropists, the call to fund policy think tanks may represent a significant point of departure from established priorities, and another draw on limited resources. Recent changes in the tax treatment of donation of stock options for charitable causes may serve to loosen this constraint, and create new opportunities for giving and think tank support. Shifting in this direction should not be too dramatic: community and family foundations regularly support seed projects in front-line service delivery and community services; and many US foundations and a select few Canadian foundations support think tanks and other policy research organizations to carry out new programs, demonstration projects, evaluations, and other systematic research to broaden horizons and inform policy debates. More specifically, Lindquist (1993: 578) suggested that Canadian foundations should support think tanks more vigorously: it should be apparent that conservative foundations have done so, but that challenge has not been taken up widely on the centre-left part of the spectrum.⁴ To support think tanks in a new environment need not imply carte-blanche funding; such funding requires a business case and foundations should be working with partners and other advisors to identify gaps in knowledge and where good, leading-edge policy work could make a contribution. Finally, foundations could collectively commit to gravitating towards a common target for funding Canadian think tanks over, say, a 10-year period, which would introduce some stability to the sector but also provide ongoing stimulus for innovation.

Investing in policy research should trump commentary. We should expect that, as has been the case in the United States, the number of vanity, legacy, and purely value-driven think tanks will multiply in Canada. However, values discourse and debate may avoid the probing of the contours and content of problems and easily degenerate into name-calling and unproductive public debate. To be sure, such voices and debate will always be a feature of democratic life, but they should be leavened with research and analysis that, even if associated with advocacy coalitions, probes issues and options more deeply. From an investment perspective it is worth noting that Rich (2004), in his balanced account of US think tanks, expresses concern about how the premium attached by many funders and leaders of think tanks for staff to engage in “commentary” in talk-show environments has steadily corroded the legitimacy that think tanks once derived from “expertise.” It is for this reason that I would recommend that foundations leave the funding of vanity, legacy and pure value-driven think tanks to members and private philanthropists, and instead develop a clear vision for the kind of policy issues they want examined and the quality of

⁴ There are exceptions, of course, and one example is the Atkinson Charitable Foundation, which has funded Canadian Policy Research Networks, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, and the Public Policy Forum, among other research organizations.

research they wish to support. Rather, I would suggest that priority be given to work that: focuses on tough questions to learn “surprising” answers; informs the actual design of government programs or better monitors the performance of markets and governments; involves detailed benchmarking and comparisons across jurisdictions; and addresses not only policy design but carefully considers implementation, organizational design, and resource issues. This, in a similar way to how the early US foundations influenced the emergence of the social sciences and public administration, could affect the trajectory of policy research and debate in Canada.

Foundations, think tanks, and leveraging universities. For many foundations, the prospect of funding another constituency will seem daunting, not only because it might potentially constitute an unfamiliar program focus, but also because of the implied aggregate outlays. However, shrewd foundations would not have to fund all of the overhead and personnel costs; there is a considerable amount of fundamental and potentially policy-oriented work proceeding at universities across Canada. The best think tanks know how to lever that research, even if it is not fully “policy-ready,” and work with scholars to transform it into policy-relevant analysis, so there are best practices to learn from. Sometimes this might involve identifying and building interdisciplinary teams. This, of course, would require that think tanks and foundations ascertain priorities and scan for promising work, and, if the advice above is followed, setting the bar very high for what passes for policy-relevant research and analysis. We should acknowledge that, with the exception of economics, and some of the other design professions (architecture, business, engineering, etc.), few social science disciplines are “design” oriented; think tanks can have this aspiration as a core mandate, though not all do. With such products in hand, think tanks can also focus on conveying insight and alternatives to key target audiences in short and longer terms.

Tackling the media environment. A persistent challenge for governments, think tanks, and scholars alike is the news cycle and short attention span of the media. The incentives for reporters and media conglomerates do not favour more in-depth reporting that would take advantage of higher quality policy research and analysis; yet, this medium is crucial for better informing citizens, governments, officials and other stakeholders of new ways to look at issues, best practices and alternative options, and their costs and benefits. We know that the Atkinson Charitable Foundation funds the Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy and the University of Toronto’s Massey College hosts the Canadian Journalism Fellowship Program (previously known as the Southam Fellows). However, as part of a broader strategy to support better policy research and dialogue in Canada, and given the disincentives for thorough reporting, thought should be given to whether there should be more such fellowships or other mechanisms for engaging and informing journalists, so they have better background even when filing short stories or clips. One solution might be to work with newspapers and other media to literally create sufficient space for policy actors to share diverging views and best evidence. In short they could enhance the space for a balanced public discourse.

The outcomes will take time and be opaque. Funding better informed policy debates, of course, does not lead to predictable outcomes; it should, however, lead to better informed citizens, stakeholders, and debates. Think tanks are in a strong position to make this happen, and can do so in flexible ways, but high quality research and outreach activities requires certain thresholds of funding and certainty, particularly if their work does not revolve only around promulgating values. The goal is not to achieve “consensus” on issues, but rather to increase understanding of the complexities of issues and problems, the range of options available, their strengths and weaknesses, and the prospects of making a difference in certain time frames. One outcome will be better groomed staff who will assume leadership roles in different parts of policy communities, and research insight that will reach broader audiences. Debate and disagreement are inherent in a democratic society, and duly elected governments and fellow intellectual traveling companions and advisors will dominate policy decision-making for periods of time, but we need to ensure that debate over issues is as informed as possible, to clarify what constitutes the policy problem, as well as identifying possible solutions. This line of reasoning also suggests that such challenge and debate should be internal to advocacy coalitions as well, and this, perhaps, is where the prospects for renewal and enlightenment are greatest.

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