

# The CIS at Thirty

Andrew Norton interviews **Executive Director Greg Lindsay** on the CIS's work and influence.

The CIS celebrates its 30th anniversary this year, to be marked by a celebratory dinner on Thursday, 4 May. It has come a long way from founder Greg Lindsay's Pennant Hills backyard shed in 1976. In the years following, it was a very small organisation, running occasional conferences and seminars, and putting out mostly academic papers and books. The early story was told in 20th and 25th anniversary interviews in *Policy* (Winter 1996 and Summer 2001–02).

These days, thinkers, policymakers, businesspeople, and the media consistently look to the Centre's raft of research papers and monographs—often written by in-house staff—for accurate assessments and fresh ideas. It is a rare day that CIS research or researchers fail to appear somewhere in the media.

Several of its annual events have also become institutions in their own right, including: Consilium, a conference devoted to major issues and ideas; Liberty & Society, a student seminar series; and the John Bonython Lecture, which brings leading



thinkers and writers from around the world to Australia. This year's lecture will be the 23<sup>rd</sup>. Along with regular lectures, briefings and presentations, these annual activities continue to promote cross-pollination between the CIS and academia, politics, the media, and elsewhere.

Increased prominence has also led to increased public curiosity. People want to know about the organisation: how it prioritises its issues, how it goes about its business, and where it is headed. Its 30th birthday is a good time to put some questions on these issues to Greg Lindsay, the CIS's founder and Executive Director.

**Andrew Norton:** An article about think tanks in *The Age* last December said that the CIS is ‘The most influential Australian think tank, according to both its allies and its enemies’. What exactly are you trying to influence—is it the public debate, or actual policies? How do you measure influence?

**Greg Lindsay:** CIS began as a generator and disseminator of ideas, and we have turned out to be pretty good at it. Maybe that’s a function of longevity as much as anything else, though I do think the dissemination part of what we do has improved markedly over the years. How do we measure the impact of our work? It’s a perennial question for think tanks and other public-education organisations. Column inches in the print media, radio interviews, hits on websites, citations by policymakers, etc., all have some validity. Also, organisational growth in accordance with our basic philosophy is important. In our case, as our enemies and friends agree, all these measures are highly positive. Our ideas and researchers appear in the domestic and international media most days, the number of hits to our website continues to grow, and the size of the organisation—in terms of the budget and, as a consequence, staffing—has continued to grow.

**AN:** What about your personal influence? Eighteen months ago, *The Bulletin* said that you were probably the most influential man in Australia.

**GL:** That assertion notwithstanding, I don’t seem to appear on most lists of such people, so either I am not or I work in very mysterious ways. Really though, CIS is more than just me: we have good people producing excellent work and then getting it out there. The other thing *The Bulletin* said was that our fingerprints are all over both sides of the country’s political agenda. That the ideas we promote ‘seep out’ into the public arena ‘without too much bother about their source’. That’s influence, apparently. But the thing is, all we have done is generate and disseminate the ideas. If the material we produce wasn’t of a high standard and of importance, nobody would notice. It probably doesn’t hurt yet again to mention the quote of Keynes about the power of ideas:

The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back.... Sooner or later, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil.

Quite who the madmen in authority are I don’t know, but Keynes was certainly right about the power of ideas for good or evil. It’s important to make sure that good ideas prevail, and that’s at the core of our work.

We won’t lobby anyone and haven’t lobbied anyone. Occasionally we get asked to give evidence to, or speak before, some parliamentary enquiry on some issue or other and we will do that, but that’s pretty much the limit of our involvement with politicians except when they speak at our functions, as they do at *Consilium* and the *Policymakers* series. Despite, apparently, being the Prime Minister’s favourite think tank, in the 10 years of the Howard government, I have spoken to the Prime Minister maybe 10 times and have never been to the Lodge nor Kirribilli House. That’s how it ought to be. We take our independence pretty seriously. Having said that, at some point, in a democracy, if ideas are to have an impact they need to be translated into policy, and it’s politicians who have to do that. It’s gratifying when the ideas do go to that point.

**AN:** How does the CIS go about trying to influence debate/policy? Have its strategies changed over time?

**GL:** First and foremost, the Centre tries to influence the climate of opinion. Policy will follow. It has to be that way. Sure, we might get a few in parliament or in circles where it matters to accept some idea or policy or other, but for this to stick and not be a matter of electoral cycle flip-flopping, the public has also to accept, if only in fairly general terms, the same basic idea. Elite opinion is important and it is

the key to wider dissemination of the ideas, but we live in a vigorous democracy and that requires, to more than just a modest extent, the acceptance of the ideas by the public. A community that feels that it has been disenfranchised by having some policies imposed against its better understanding, will have its way at the ballot box. Better for an organisation like us to focus on generating and disseminating ideas and let others respond accordingly.

Our strategies for getting our ideas to the public have changed because we have just got better at it. That has also come about because we have had more resources available. Perhaps it's a chicken and egg thing really. As we got better at disseminating material, we were able to attract more support, which then allowed us to improve our ability to disseminate. In days past for instance, we figured it was just OK to produce a book and put it out there for people to make up their minds about. That had limited effect. Today, the core ideas in a monograph may find their way into half a dozen different published forms and countless electronic and other mediums. To do this meant having the appropriate level of human resources available to us and today we are in better shape in that regard. Ten years ago it wasn't the case. We thus can get to the intellectuals, however broadly defined you want the term to be, to the policymakers and to the general public with different, though sometimes overlapping, publications.

**AN:** How important has new technology like the internet been?

**GL:** An additional resource that was not widely used 10 years ago was of course the internet. Back then we had a basic website that I used to maintain myself. Today we have a cornucopia of material available for the public that has added to our ability to launch ideas to a worldwide audience. We give much of our material away. To a considerable degree now, we also use our website and email to market our events. Some of our sellout lectures in the last year or so did not have a paper invitation at all. This has also been a tremendous economy measure. Overall, our use of the internet and what it can do will increase in the future. During 2006, there will be a substantial remaking of our website and we hope to be able to add sound so people can

hear our lectures online and perhaps video. We will certainly explore podcasting when we have the resources and time to do so.

**AN:** What role do events like Consilium play?

**GL:** In 2000, we decided to turn an occasional Board retreat into something more ambitious. Consilium was born. At the time we just didn't predict how important an event it would become. It was never envisaged to be a large conference as we wanted to focus on getting core ideas discussed by senior people, but with the discussion the key. We developed a format with a limit of 110 people, around 30 of whom present short papers, and the rest are paying and invited special guests. The spaces are highly sought after and we are able to bring to Australia an extraordinary range of interesting speakers who help inform those present and also participate in other activities hosted by the CIS for the public at large. Overall it has been a means of allowing people at the highest levels—business leaders, politicians, academics and the like—to participate in our work in the knowledge that the ideas will also gain wider currency with the public as the ideas transmission lines open.

**AN:** Of course all these strategies rely on someone paying the bills, and think tank finances have been the subject of more than a little media curiosity. The general argument is that donors ought to be disclosed so that possible conflicts of interest can be seen. You, however, have always taken the view that, except where they want acknowledgment, donors ought to have privacy. Would it hurt to be more open about where the money comes from?

**GL:** This is one of those 'damned-if-you-do and damned-if-you-don't' questions. CIS is supported by broadly three different groups and roughly equally: individuals, foundations and corporations. Apart from individual memberships, book sales, and seminar fees, the support is entirely philanthropic. This means that we can't offer donors anything in return for their support, and they know they cannot ask. We won't accept government support and we will not take commissioned projects. To repeat: no government grants, no academic research grants, no contracts of any kind. Because we have

broad support, we are able to undertake studies that nobody would think of supporting. Fundraising for the ideas business is hard work and it is rocky most of the time. There have been periods where I didn't think we could manage our payroll. But we did. Certainly to try and paint the CIS as some agency speaking for the corporate sector is drawing a very long bow. The corporate sector is of course fundamental to modern prosperity and our way of life, but we should also be mindful of Adam Smith's view that 'People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices.' The fact is that there have been many, many examples of work we have published that has argued emphatically against one or another corporate or special interest and we received flack for doing so. Wolfgang Kasper's 'Pork Watch', our study on the sugar industry, our arguments for free trade and for the deregulation of various markets, these all had the effect of promoting the public interest against that of some sectional group. The media and anyone else can speculate all they like, but it would be a better use of their time to look at the ideas, the arguments and the work generally. Criticise the arguments by all means, but don't assume there's some nefarious conspiracy at work.

**AN:** The CIS's choice of issues has attracted some comment. It has kept away from some of the libertarian issues taken up by its overseas counterparts, for example drug decriminalisation. And it has taken up issues that are traditionally conservative territory, such as the state of the family. Given that, is the media wrong when it describes the CIS as a 'conservative' think tank?

**GL:** Our first 10 years focused almost entirely on economic issues, the next 10 began an ongoing commitment to social policy issues, and within the last 10, a growing interest in international and strategic policy. Just because some may comment on this or that issue doesn't mean that an organisation like the CIS should spend resources thinking about it. I could list hundreds of issues we might have done had we had the people, the funds or the interest for that matter. Pretty much everything is on the table for examination, but like any enterprise, we have to allocate scarce resources

as best we can. Our larger purpose may mean that we just have to put some things aside, for now. The scope for dealing with issues will expand with size. It's as fundamental as that.

As far as labels go, we have had our fair share of colourful descriptions over 30 years. Once I used to be personally affronted and bewildered at the ignorance and self-serving nature of some of our critics, and for that matter some of our friends. I don't think I am any less sensitive to this sort of thing, but I just have to focus on where we are going and not on what people think. We have cheerfully outlasted most of our critics and by and large we are a Centre for Independent Studies without adjectives. Still, if it helps people to try and pigeon-hole us, there's not a lot I can do.

Conservative is one label that I won't reject entirely, but I do ask people to look more closely. Our underlying philosophy is probably best seen as informed by that of the great classical liberals and scholars of the Enlightenment. Some might see that as 'conservative', but it probably says more about them than about us. Is being concerned about the family a conservative matter? In some senses of course it is, and there is much in traditional conservative thinking about social institutions that is critical. We are talking about the maintenance, perhaps survival, of our healthy free society. How are individuals taught the skills and attributes that such a society needs? I don't believe that there has been and I don't believe that there will be a better institution for doing this than the traditional two-parent family. If that's conservative, then so be it. It's not perfect and not all children will be raised in such an environment. I wasn't myself for my entire adolescence, but my reading of history and of the empirical evidence leads me to no other conclusion. The fact that we republished Hayek's essay 'Why I am not a conservative' was not accidental.

**AN:** The CIS has pursued an eclectic mix of issues over recent years: welfare dependence, the problems of our Pacific neighbours, education, Indigenous poverty, welfare more generally, civility, tax. There have also been some major national debates in which the CIS wasn't much of a player—health policy, the environment and global warming, terrorism and civil liberties and even past strengths like microeconomic reform. How does the CIS decide which issues to tackle?

**GL:** You just can't do everything, as much as you would like to. If we were 10 times our size would we be doing 10 times the work, or working on 10 times the issues? Possibly, but you have to play to your strengths. Almost always, we have developed our successful work when we have key individuals involved. I don't believe for instance, that any of our acknowledged strength in social policy would have come about without Barry Maley and Peter Saunders and the many younger people who have worked under their guidance. This is also true of our early economic policy material that had the firm hand of Ross Parish at work. And certainly the more recent interest in the Pacific and Indigenous matters would not have the same penetration without the extraordinary Helen Hughes steering the way, and the toughness of people like Sue Windybank willing to go out on a limb on some issues. I could also go through our entire staff list, now and in the past, and highlight their wonderful contribution to the output and life of the Centre, not to mention to the country. I am left in their wake as I try to keep all the strings tied in a cohesive way.

Health policy is an interesting and a critical issue on which we have done some work in the past. John Logan, before he died at too young an age, was one of the few economists working in the health policy area who approached the complex area from a broadly market perspective. We published quite a bit of material from John on health policy back in the late 1980s. More recently, we have been endeavouring to find an economist to take up the issue again, but we have met more dead-ends than clear ways ahead on this. It will happen, but only when the right person is heading the project.

There seemed to be more than enough people working in the environmental area for us to embark on that as well, though I must say I am not sure if the debates have advanced satisfactorily on this. Perhaps we may yet put our toe in the water. I think we have been on the periphery of the terrorism issue and I can assure readers that this will become a central matter in the years ahead. Similarly on civil liberties: I do think our record there is a good one. There are many examples. For instance, we were one of the principal organisations that argued against the ID card some years ago, and we will do so again. The new security laws have had considerable discussion internally and an analysis of

the trade-offs that may be made and whether they should be made between security and liberty will be something we will do. These are serious matters and need to be discussed seriously.

Overall, our agenda realistically has no limits. CIS is in business to protect the free society and our liberal democratic institutions. That is going to be something we will all have to think about very comprehensively in the near future. It's a troubled world out there. There is no end of history just yet.

**AN:** If the right people could be found, what issues would you like to see the CIS take up over the next five years?

**GL:** The early 21<sup>st</sup> century may turn out to be one of the most uncertain periods in modern times. That's a pretty big statement to make, but the evidence is there. To face the future robustly, Australia and New Zealand cannot rest on past glories and old ideas. We must continually reform all aspects of our lives to build resilience to any threat that might materialise. I don't wish to overdramatise this, but we could be facing intense economic, political and security challenges in a reasonably short time frame. The reforms of the 1980s and 1990s were extremely important and extremely successful, but that was then and now is now. The need to carry these reforms forward will mean that CIS will put an increased emphasis on arguing for continued economic reform. A strong economy is the only way that we can deal with whatever other uncertainties we may face.

Im very keen to continue to build an active team of researchers in all three areas that we are working because they are all interrelated. So, a wish list?

Well, we talked about health policy earlier in this discussion and that clearly is a gap we must fill. Good advances have been made in welfare reform and in school choice, but there's much to do there yet. It appears that some further taxation reform is on the cards. Tax cuts are all very nice, but if Australia is to continue on the path to becoming a more open and outward-looking economy, then considerable reform is still needed. Much of our work on taxation over the past couple of years gives fairly clear guides as to where we, at least in Australia, should be heading.

Some of the traditional functions that government carried out, particularly in various forms of infrastructure such as roads, water and so on, have been neglected for too long. By CIS too. Governments, faced with ever increasing demands for transfer payments such as welfare and with limits on the willingness for taxpayers to be fleeced any further, have let some things drop. Infrastructure has been a casualty, but in the end perhaps no bad thing. If the private sector is given the room to step in, under the right conditions, we will all be winners. Government involvement in so much of this stuff has gone way beyond its use-by date and it shows.

But as I have said, the key feature of any of our programmes is the people who staff them. If we were to double our budget tomorrow, 80% of the

increase would go into additional staff. The rest would probably go into somewhere to put them.

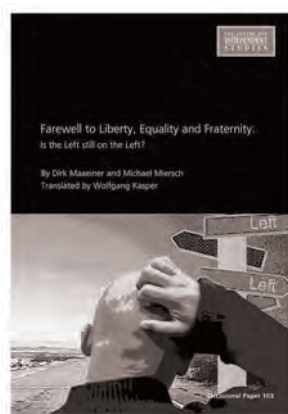
Perhaps by our 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary one of our goals will be to get the size of government back to where it was in 1976. That would signify that the ideas about what governments should do and what we should do for ourselves, have finally made the shift from ideas to practice. It seems that it takes at least a generation for our public and social institutions of all kinds to adapt. The next challenge will be to keep it going in that direction. That's as much a cultural problem as anything else. The conservative culture that infects our institutions of learning, media, the arts and the world of ideas cannot be exempted from the need for change.



## The Ethic of Respect: A Left Wing Cause

By Frank Field

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By Dirk Maxeiner and Michael Miersch

Translated by Wolfgang Kasper

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