

THE ROLE OF THINK TANKS:

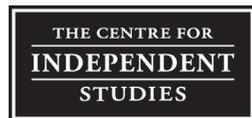
A Reply to the Critics

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Ad Hominem: “Propagandist Fronts and Money Launderers”

The role of think tanks in a democratic society is to engage in the battle of ideas by providing research-based advocacy and evidence-based commentary on pertinent public affairs. One reason most think tanks across the ideological spectrum tend to choose not to disclose their financial supporters is to avoid the risk of full disclosure of identity of funders becoming the story, and distracting attention from the merits of the think tank’s research. As the ABC’s Media Watch program established in an episode aired in May 2013, think tanks on both the right and left, including left-wing The Australia Institute, do not disclose their funders.¹ The reason for this is that the release of this information into the public domain would invite those who are determined to ‘follow the money’ to mount politically-motivated, ad hominem attacks.²

A good example of these types of attacks was offered by an opinion piece former Whitlam government bureaucrat, John Menadue posted on his blog in June 2014, singling out centre-right Australian think-tanks for condemnation over the funding disclosure issue. In an extraordinary attack, Menadue claimed those think tanks that were not to his ideological taste were “a cash for comment enterprise” and “fronts for rent-seekers who hide behind the scenes.” He claimed these organisations, while “hawk[ing] themselves around as ‘independent’ ... receive large amounts of money, seldom disclose their sponsors and donors and then conduct overt political campaigns, invariably on behalf of business and the conservative side

of politics.” Menadue even hinted that these claimed “propagandist fronts for the laundering of money for special interests” were lucky not to find themselves hauled before the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), along with the property developers and assorted “urgers and spivs” who “launder money to hand on to political parties.”³

Menadue nevertheless maintained that think tanks “are important players in the battle of ideas but this battle needs to be conducted honestly and transparently.” He noted that he was the founding Chair and a Fellow of the left-of-centre The Centre for Policy Development, which fully discloses its major supporters and donors. This claim to probity buttressed Menadue’s critique of rival centre-right organisations that choose not to disclose their financial backers, with the assumption being that full disclosure is a sure sign that think tanks are operating ethically and not corrupting public debate. But this actually begs the question: how does knowing for certain who is paying the piper make the tune played by think tanks any less ‘cash for comment’?

The Boring Materialist School

Unfortunately, the partisan, ad hominem approach is the preferred line of attack of those who are determined to discredit right-of-centre think tanks they wish would shut up — or be shut up.

Writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in May 2014, columnist Richard Ackland drew the same parallel as Menadue. He suggested that “industry commissioned think tanks and their political influence peddling” should attract the scrutiny of ICAC to establish if they were “legitimately part of the democratic process.” The substance of Ackland’s complaint amounted to having “libertarian corporate messages jammed down our throats.” According to his source (“a recent tally by an ABC watcher”), representatives of prominent centre-right think tanks had had the temerity to appear

on the ABC at an average rate of one appearance every four days. Even the smallest amount of token balance on the taxpayer-funded national broadcaster seemed too much diversity for Ackland to swallow.⁴

Shortly after his piece appeared, Ackland left the *Sydney Morning Herald* to write for a new weekend newspaper, *The Saturday Paper*, published by Black Inc —the house publisher for those of left ‘progressive’ political persuasion in Australia. In 2009, the well-regarded editor of another Black Inc publication, *The Monthly*, was forced to leave the position after she tried to include an article in the magazine by former Coalition Treasurer Peter Costello in reply to a piece on the Global Financial Crisis authored by then Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. Permission to publish the Costello article was refused by the publisher (on the advice of *The Monthly*’s editorial board) on the basis that *The Monthly* was an avowedly social democrat rather than independent magazine.⁵

Fair enough: the decision to publish or not publish was rightly the publisher’s prerogative, whatever the rationale — political or otherwise. Despite these events, however, Ackland clearly had no qualms about being paid by a media outlet with a self-identified (and censorious) leftist outlook. Does that mean we should dismiss out of hand everything he writes in *The Saturday Paper* as inherently biased ‘cash for comment’ dictated by the money power of the rich patron who is calling the partisan political tune of all that is published under the Black Inc. title?

Of course not. Imagine if this school of crude quasi-Marxist analysis set the parameters of public debate. How boring, how devoid of actual content, and how bereft of a genuine contest of ideas, would public life be? Yet these are the ‘boring materialist’ accusations that critics routinely use to play the man, ignore the ball, and condemn centre-right think tanks. This is very much the house style in some left-leaning sections of media that are keen to regurgitate conspiracy theories about what allegedly happens when “money and ‘ideas’ hold hands.”⁶

Of Civil Society and the Democratic Process

What is concerning about the misleading broad brush claims made about all centre-right think tanks is how poorly informed the critics are about why they exist, and about the means by which they can gain political influence.

Think tanks are creatures of civil society. They are non-government organisations that depend for their survival upon the individuals and the business and charitable organisations prepared to financially support not-for-profit ventures whose aim is to create a better educated democracy. Think tanks' roles, together with the financial relationships with their supporters, are an entirely legitimate part of the democratic process. The will and ability of like-minded people to band together to inform their fellow citizens about matters of public importance has long been an important and valued feature of truly democratic societies.

Think tanks are the modern day equivalents of the variety of civic-minded groups, campaigns and movements that have long dotted the public life of democratic countries. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these kinds of bodies (which often relied on raising subscriptions from members to operate) agitated for political action in any number of directions — demanding everything from a new local bridge to votes for women — across local, state, and national issues.

Think tanks are involved in politics — and as opposed to *partisan party* politics — in the best and classical sense of the term. Their political activity consists of initiating and participating in public debates in order to expose members of the public to new ideas, competing analyses and different points of view. They thereby participate in the key part of the democratic process: the process through which contentious issues are debated in the public square and then ultimately are resolved according to the votes cast at the ballot box and in freely-elected representative assemblies.

Because their aims are educational and democratic, what think tanks do and why they do it is entirely transparent: they ensure their research is publicly available and seek to ensure it is disseminated via the media to as broad an audience as possible in the hope of swaying public opinion. Critics who promote the myth that all centre-right think tanks are Machiavellian backroom enterprises that pull the strings of feeble-minded politician-puppets, are choosing to ignore what is staring them in the face about think tanks' so-called hidden influence. Publicly declaring the policies and detailing the reasons why they want members of parliament to support these policies is both democratic and transparent, as well as a constant reminder that a think tank will achieve political influence only subject to the democratic process. Any influence over legislative outcomes will be entirely subject to the decisions made by democratically-elected representatives who are ultimately accountable to their electorates for those decisions.

Influence-Peddling?

A think tank that doesn't want to put the right ideas, as they see them, into the minds and mouths of politicians isn't really a think tank. Naturally, think tanks and their supporters want to see the measures they propose taken up through the political process and translated into government policy. But that aspiration is a long way from political influence peddling, because think tanks generally have little, if any, traditional political influence to peddle.

Think tanks are not stakeholders or institutional players in party politics. They have no brute political hold over those occupying ministerial and parliamentary offices because they do not represent significant proportions of the electorate. Hence think tanks cannot gain political influence by implying that behind their advice lies control over the destination of significant numbers of ballots. Nor do think tanks provide material aid (donations) to political parties, which is the accepted currency of political favours.

Of course, there will be ideological alignment between fellow traveller right- and left-wing think tanks and parties. Yet think tanks' advice is often politically unwelcome when their policy recommendations threaten the interests of voters whose support the parties need. For example, a left-of-centre think tank that calls for the private health insurance rebate to be scrapped is being as electorally unhelpful to the Labor Party as a right-of-centre think tank that calls for the Liberal Party to introduce a copayment for Medicare services (as CIS did). The more ideologically pure a think tank is, the less it will operate as a partisan cheer squad. The more it operates as the ideological conscience of the left or the right, the more politically unhelpful its advice is likely to be. And the less political influence it may have.

The biggest misconception about think tanks is that they operate as corporate shills fronting for the highest bidder. Corporate and other institutional players (including unions and industry bodies) do not need think tanks to throw their political weight around. This is why the 'government relations' sector is a thriving, multimillion dollar industry. Paying a think tank to write a research report would be going the long, long way round to achieving the corporate objectives of influencing policy outcomes. This is why large salaries and fees are paid to in-house lobbyists and external lobbying firms that have party-political connections (established by years of loyal party membership and service) and whose 'strategic advice' principally consists of the ability to get access to politicians and their staff to plead their corporate client's case.

Vested Interests

The government relations sector, far more than think tanks, is responsible for injecting special interests into the heart of the political and policy making process. This is because the lobbyist's role is often to defend the status quo, and keep in place a piece of government policy, legislation, or regulation that protects client's

vested interests. Think tanks, on the right-of-centre at least, are more likely to be true to their free market and limited government instincts, and will oppose the rent seeking advantages wrung from government in both the private or public sector.

Yet right-of-centre think tanks remain vulnerable to the charge of special pleading even when they call for economic reform, de-regulation, and for market-based approaches to public policy. This is because in an area such as health, for example, private sector operators stand to benefit if governments, say, adopt a policy of outsourcing the provision of public hospital services.

But to mistake a think tank's calls for privatisation as serving special interests mistakes support for capitalism with support for individual capitalists. If public hospitals are privatised, the opening up of this market to tender will see the service contracts won by the best bidder. There is no guarantee this policy will serve the vested interests of a particular corporation unless that corporation proves able to provide the greatest public benefit — i.e. can it provide the community with the best quality hospital services at the least cost to taxpayers.⁷

Culture Warriors

It is not just the perception of special pleading that makes right-of-centre think tanks a target for critics on the left. They are also a target because they dissent from left-progressive thinking on a range of social and economic policy issues. This is what defines their purpose and gives 'right-wing' think tanks their competitive advantage. Some individuals and organisations are clearly willing to support centre-right think tanks that will say certain things about certain topics that others won't — and which are prepared to voice perspectives that are not usually heard in the universities, in the media, and among members of the political class in general.

Right-of-centre think tanks tend therefore to be prominently engaged in what is rightly called the culture war — they stand

athwart the long march of the left through the culture-shaping institutions. Right-of-centre think tanks and their staff take the heat for going against the prevailing leftist grain of the culture — heat and hostility that can take the form of everything from personal abuse to professional and social isolation. They bear the brunt of the left's politics of moral vanity and intellectual conceit, which assumes that those on the right aren't just wrong and mistaken in their views but are personally immoral.

Think tanks thus provide standing and strength in numbers for those who support right-of-centre values. But they also provide their supporters with a shield, and with the safety and security of anonymity and privacy. They allow their supporters to express their right-of-centre views by proxy and avoid directly encountering the hostility of the intolerant left. There is little mystery as to the reason these think tanks don't disclose their funders' identities. Centre-right think tanks that did make full financial disclosures would simply be facilitating the targeting of their supporters' personal and commercial interests. They would also be helping cut their own throats by helping critics with political axes to grind punish loyal supporters simply for exercising their democratic right to free association.

So who pays for 'right-wing' think tanks? The stock answer to this loaded question should be: the same people who pay for university humanities departments, except that they pay voluntarily through private donations to fund right-of-centre causes they support, instead of being forced to pay compulsorily through the tax system to fund left-of-centre causes they don't support. The reality is that contemporary cultural institutions tilt to the left, and in contemporary society a price is paid in social opprobrium for lining up on the right of the ideological spectrum. So long as these things remain so, there will be a role and rationale for right-of-centre think tanks.

Play by the rules, not the man

With negligible access to the traditional channels of political and, indeed, cultural influence, think tanks can attain influence only by providing credible answers to the complex questions policymakers grapple with. Credibility is the only political asset a think tank can acquire, and credibility is achieved by work that is based on sound research.

Think tank research is basically applied scholarship. This means that scholarly methods are used to accurately describe policy problems and suggest workable solutions. Findings and recommendations are also expressed in clear and direct language shorn of the jargon that mars academic writing, so the points made are effectively communicated and can be understood by the media, politicians and the general public. Any political impact achieved by dint of empirical graft among the academic journals, official statistics, and the assorted ephemera of public policy is not an example of 'influence' in the tainted pejorative sense. Rather, it is the product of rational analysis that has offered policymakers rigorous, evidence-based, and comprehensible guidance as they seek to plot a course between alternative approaches and amid competing priorities.

Yes, think tanks are values-based organisations, and their research emits ideological convictions. (So too, of course, does academic research that doubles as left-wing advocacy.) But in seeking the support of fellow citizens and policymakers for those convictions, an effective think tank does not ask people to join a cult or take a leap of faith. Instead, they invite readers to acknowledge the logic of the ideas presented, and be convinced by the quality of the research and the facts and arguments adduced in support of the position set out.

Critics who tar all think tanks on the centre-right as propagandist fronts and money launderers are particularly unfair to think tanks

with high research standards. As a think tanker who works at one of the organisations singled out by critics like Menadue and Ackland, I personally resent the implications. These accusations dismiss without mention the blood, sweat, toil and tears of reading, thinking, and writing that goes into the production of think tank research.⁸ Ignored as well is the fact that not only does the best think tank research comply with the rules of scholarship, it also thereby encourages scholarly scrutiny, criticism and fair-minded debate. Some critics, unfortunately, do not return the courtesy.

Regardless of whether you line up on the left or right of the political spectrum, it is intellectually lazy to simply point the finger of 'special interest' at think tanks whose work is disliked or disagreed with. Casting aspersions on the motives of opponents and alleging bad faith is a poor substitute for doing the hard work of refuting a think tank's ideas by cogently marshalling the relevant evidence.

In assessing the role of centre-right think tanks, critics would make a more considered and substantial contribution to the quality of public debate if they also played by the rules of scholarship, and did not indulge in ad hominem abuse. If this were to happen, we would have underway in this country, a debate about the work and worth of think tanks that more closely resembled a genuine battle of ideas.

Endnotes

- 1 Media Watch, 'Disclosing the funding of think tanks', 27 May, 2014: <http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s3768536.htm>
- 2 For the flavour of these attacks, see 'Who's Who: Australian think tanks', Sunday Extra, ABC Radio National, 8 June 2014: <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/sundayextra/905-segment/5502446>
- 3 'Think tanks, cash for comment, and the corruption of public debate', *John Menadue – Pearls and Irritations*, 21 June, 2014: <http://johnmenadue.com/blog/?p=1669>
- 4 Richard Ackland, 'Propagandists masquerade as think tanks to push spurious science', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 May, 2014.
- 5 Gideon Haigh, 'When the media is the story', *The Age*, 2 May, 2009
- 6 Elizabeth Farrelly, 'Institute for Public Affairs: the think tank with arms everywhere', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 April, 2016.
- 7 David Gadiel and Jeremy Sammut, *How the NSW Coalition Should Govern Health: Strategies for Microeconomic Reform*, CIS Policy Monograph 128, July 2012.
- 8 Jeremy Sammut, *The Madness of Australian Child Protection: Why Adoption Will Rescue Australia's Underclass Children*, (Connor Court, 2015).



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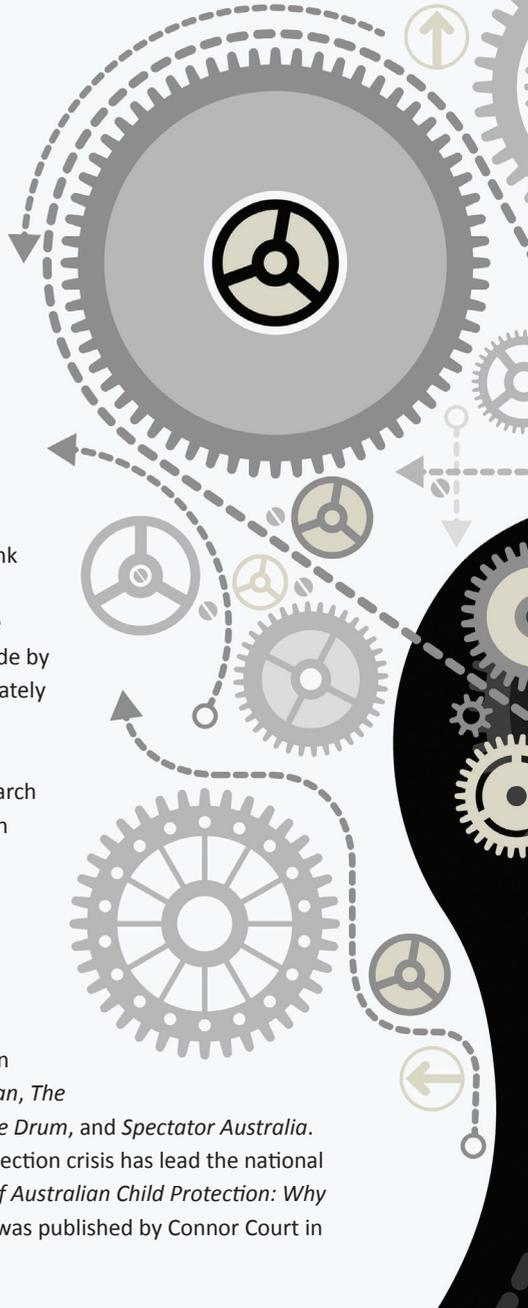
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