

CHAPTER EIGHT

*Conclusion:
Policy Influence, Policy Relevance,
and the Future of Think Tanks
in Canada, the United States,
and Beyond*

This book began with a seemingly straightforward question – do think tanks matter? Unfortunately, after surveying the think tank population in Canada and the United States and examining their involvement in the policy-making process, there does not appear to be a simple answer. Depending on who the question is directed to, responses may range from yes to no, and from at times to more than you can possibly imagine. In some respects all these answers are accurate. Indeed, as this study has demonstrated, several conclusions can be drawn regarding the role and significance of think tanks in policy-making.

Notwithstanding the considerable differences in their political systems, think tanks in the United States and Canada have often played an important role in contributing to the public dialogue. Through their publications, interviews with the media, appearances before legislative committees, and participation in conferences and seminars, think tanks have clearly made their presence felt. Moreover, in both countries think tanks have relied on less visible channels to convey their views to policy-makers. However, largely due to differences in their political structures, think tanks in the United States and Canada often attempt to exercise policy influence at different times and at different stages of the policy cycle.

The highly decentralized and fragmented political system of the United States, combined with its weak party system, helps explain why American think tanks assign a high priority to sharing their ideas with members of Congress. Since members of Congress are not constrained by party unity, think tanks have an incentive to establish contact with as many Democrats and Republicans as possible. The more predictable electoral cycle in the United States, and the absence of party-based research institutes also helps to explain why think tanks regard presidential elections and the transition periods that follow as opportune

times to influence the policy direction of government. By contrast, the presence of strong party unity in Canada and the prime minister's long-standing tradition of relying on the Prime Minister's Office, the Privy Council Office, and senior bureaucrats for policy advice may account for think tanks in Canada often relying on different channels to reach policymakers.

Differences in the institutional structures of the two countries may explain why think tanks in the United States have more opportunities or access points to influence policymakers than think tanks in Canada. However, they do not explain why some are far more effective at marketing their message than others. Several factors, including their financial resources, the number and quality of their staff, the strong connections some think tank directors have to policymakers, and their ability to convey their ideas to multiple audiences may influence how much or how little impact think tanks have.

The willingness of office holders to embrace the ideas of certain think tanks is also important in explaining why some enjoy tremendous visibility while others languish in obscurity. As chapter 6 showed, several presidential candidates, particularly those regarded as Washington outsiders, have helped to elevate the profile of several think tanks. Similarly, in Canada one sees periods when the visibility and prominence of some think tanks has either been significantly enhanced or greatly diminished. As chapter 7 demonstrated, at no other time have Canadian think tanks generated as much public attention as during the constitutional conferences in the winter of 1992. Ironically, less than two weeks after the last constitutional conference organized by a think tank ended, several other think tanks in the policy research community were forced to close their doors.

While it is not difficult to observe where in the policy cycle think tanks in the United States and Canada appear to be most active, determining how influential they are at different stages of policymaking remains problematic, since to assess how much or how little influence they have, several methodological barriers must be overcome. One major barrier is how to measure policy influence. Should it be measured by recording media citations, appearances before legislative committees, the number of publications, or the number of staff appointed to high-level positions in the government? Or are there other tangible and intangible indicators that should be considered? Do some indicators provide a more accurate measurement of policy influence than others?

Although data on each indicator may provide insight into the amount of exposure think tanks and their staff generate, they cannot confirm how much or how little influence they have in shaping public opinion and the preferences and choices of policymakers. For instance, several

think tanks tally how often their organizations are referred to in the media and the number of times their staff are called on to testify before legislative committees. But what conclusions can be drawn from these data? Not surprisingly, think tanks that register the most media citations and appearances before committees conclude that they are the most influential. Those studying these institutions must, however, be a bit more circumspect. Data on media citations may tell us which institutes are effective at making the news, yet it tells us little about whether their views have helped shape, reinforce, clarify, or change the minds of policymakers and the public. It cannot be assumed that policymakers or members of the general public are even familiar with what certain think tanks have stated in the media. Similarly, when think tanks testify before legislative committees, we cannot be certain that their statements made a difference in how policymakers approached particular issues. At times their testimony may influence the views of some policymakers; at other times, however, their input may simply reinforce the views of policymakers or, as is often the case, experts from think tanks might simply be ignored. Other indicators, such as the number of their publications or how many of their staff receive high-level appointments, may reveal even less about their influence in policy-making. Put simply, it is virtually impossible to assign a numerical value to the amount of influence think tanks wield. We cannot, for instance, conclude that think tanks have influence 20 percent or 50 percent of the time. We cannot even say for certain how much impact specific think tanks have had at particular stages of policy debates or whom exactly they have influenced. At best, by assessing their involvement in specific policy areas, we can obtain a better sense of how relevant or irrelevant they were.

In addition to considering how to measure policy influence or whether, in fact, it can be measured at all, other obstacles must be overcome to evaluate the impact of think tanks: for instance, determining how to isolate the views of think tanks from dozens of other individuals and governmental and nongovernmental organizations that actively seek to influence public policy. As the policy-making community becomes increasingly congested, tracing the origin of an idea to a particular individual or organization creates its own set of problems.

Examining the organizations and individuals who coalesce around particular policy issues or who congregate at a certain stage in the policy cycle can offer a useful point of departure for studying the interaction between policymakers and representatives of nongovernmental organizations in specific policy communities.¹ In addition to identifying the organizations and individuals most actively involved in discussing a particular policy concern with government officials, which views generated the most attention can be determined through interviews and

surveys. Yet, unless policymakers admit that their policy decisions were based primarily on recommendations from a particular individual or organization, something they are rarely inclined to do, it is difficult to determine how much influence participants in the policy process had.

Since it is unlikely that these and other methodological obstacles will be overcome, it may be more appropriate to discuss the relevance of think tanks in the policy-making process than to speculate about how much policy influence they wield. In other words, rather than trying to state categorically on the basis of a handful of indicators that some think tanks are more influential than others, it should be determined if, when, and under what conditions they can and have contributed to specific public policy discussions and to the broader policy-making environment. At the very least, scholars studying these institutions should acknowledge that given their tremendous diversity, all think tanks do not possess the resources, the expertise, or the desire to become embroiled in every policy debate. They should also acknowledge that think tanks assign different priorities to becoming involved at different stages of the policy-making process. Thus, while some think tanks may play an active role in discussing the implications of a specific government policy with the media, others may be trying to convey their views to policymakers through less visible channels.

There will be ample opportunity to assess the relevance of think tanks in the future. As the following section indicates, in Canada and the United States and in the global community, policymakers are turning increasingly to think tanks to provide expertise and to stimulate informed debate on a range of issues. The question that remains is whether think tanks possess the resources and desire to make a difference.

THE FUTURE OF THINK TANKS: A VIEW FROM CANADA, THE UNITED STATES, AND THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY

The future of publicly funded think tanks in Canada looked bleak when Conservative finance minister Don Mazankowski handed down the 1992 federal budget. Within minutes of getting up on the floor of the House of Commons, Mazankowski announced that forty-six government agencies, boards, commissions, corporations, and advisory bodies would be dismantled. After the shock of the drastic cost-cutting set in, several journalists commented on what the 1992 budget would mean for the state of policy research in Canada. What they and others discovered was that contrary to Mazankowski's assertions, there were few other sources of independent expertise in Canada that could fill the void left by some of Canada's leading domestic and foreign policy think tanks.²

Had Mazankowski and his advisors looked more closely at the external policy research community, they would have realized that there were no private institutes, university departments, or other non-governmental sources of policy expertise that possessed the resources to undertake the extensive long-term research being conducted by the Economic Council of Canada (ECC). Not even the Conference Board of Canada and the C.D. Howe Institute, which the finance minister considered viable replacements for the ECC, were prepared or qualified to assume this role.³ Moreover, there did not appear to be many organizations that could carry out the type of work initiated by the Science Council of Canada. At the time of its closure, several other scientific bodies existed, including the National Advisory Board on Science and Technology, the National Research Council, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, and the Council of Science and Technology Ministers, but unlike the Science Council of Canada their mandate was not to provide long-term thinking on issues of science and technology. As Janet Halliwell, head of the Science Council remarked shortly after the budget, without the Science Council, "the Canadian economy loses its reflective foresight capacity."⁴

In foreign policy the Mulroney government did not demonstrate much foresight either. There were no institutes that had the staff or the financial resources to mount the type of research program on peace and security conducted by the CIIPS. Indeed, except for the small and poorly funded research centres on defense and security issues at a dozen Canadian universities and except for a handful of think tanks that dealt with international affairs in some fashion, the foreign-policy research community remained relatively barren.⁵

The 1992 budget called into question the importance policymakers gave to policy research institutes, but in recent years high-level policymakers have once again recognized the contribution think tanks can make to improving public policy. In July 1996 Jocelyne Bourgon, former clerk of the privy council office and secretary to the cabinet, launched the Policy Research Initiative (PRI), an ongoing project that has involved several think tanks across Canada. Overseen by the Policy Research Secretariat of the Privy Council Office, the PRI is intended to help government departments and agencies determine the most effective ways to enhance the policy capacity of the federal public service, an important concern in the wake of government downsizing. Recognizing the dual needs of providing greater policy coordination in an increasingly complex policy environment and helping government think more strategically about the long-term implications of particular policies, the PRI has taken a profound interest in the state of the policy research community. Think tanks have figured prominently in the

Policy Research Secretariat's discussions on building stronger networks between organizations engaged in policy analysis and federal department and agencies. While it is premature to predict how worthwhile the PRI will be, it is clear that think tanks have been presented with a significant opportunity to showcase what they can contribute to policy-making.

Unlike several think tanks in the United States, the majority of policy institutes in Canada cannot impress policymakers with high-profile staffers or multimillion dollar budgets, nor will they likely be able to in the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, as this study has shown, think tanks do not require millions of dollars or dozens of staff members to convey their ideas. As Ken Battle of the Caledon Institute and David Zussman of the Public Policy Forum, among others, have demonstrated, using some ingenuity to communicate ideas to policymakers and putting important and valuable ideas on the table can go a long way in establishing think tanks as relevant players in policy-making.

As in the past, Canadian think tanks in the coming years will be faced with important challenges, not the least of which is securing access to sufficient funds and qualified staff. To survive, some may have to merge or occasionally pool their resources with other institutes. This may be the only way a number of smaller think tanks can remain open. Others may elect to merge to simply enhance their overall profile.⁶ Still, unless philanthropic foundations and affluent donors in Canada become as enamoured with think tanks as have several leading philanthropists in the United States, it is unlikely that many Canadian policy institutes will ever enjoy financial security.

Besides constant funding concerns, think tanks in Canada will have to give serious thought to what their mission is and how it can best be achieved. If think tanks are truly committed to improving governmental decision making, as many claim they are, they have to provide policymakers with what they require most – long-term strategic thinking about key domestic and foreign policy issues. On the other hand, if they are more interested in advancing a particular ideological agenda than in supplementing the policy needs of government, they should pay closer attention to the strategies pursued by more advocacy-oriented institutes in the United States. Although a handful of think tanks in Canada have adopted this mode, it has yet to become the dominant trend.

The tendency of think tanks in the United States to become more advocacy-oriented will, however, likely continue. As more institutes enter the already crowded policy-research community, they will rely on a wide range of strategies to capture the attention of the public, the media, and the policymakers. Moreover, if the Democratic and

Republican parties become increasingly divided in the coming years, members of Congress will likely be even more willing to listen to those think tanks whose views strike a responsive chord with their constituents. However, the ever watchful eye of the Internal Revenue Service could interfere with the efforts of advocacy think tanks to achieve their goals. If the IRS revoked the tax-exempt status of a high-profile think tank for engaging in inappropriate political activities, it would send a strong message to other think tanks to curtail some of their more aggressive marketing techniques.

Despite the likelihood that the IRS will pay closer attention to the activities of think tanks, there is little to suggest that the growth rate of policy institutes in the United States will come to a halt. Think tanks have continued to spring up throughout the country. So long as there are policy entrepreneurs willing to create them and philanthropists prepared to fund them, there is no reason to believe that the explosion of policy institutes witnessed over the past two decades will fizzle out. However, while a handful in the United States will likely continue to dominate the headlines, it must be remembered that the majority of American think tanks closely resemble those in Canada in size and scope. Like the majority of Canadian think tanks, most in the United States will have to think about how to establish their niche in the policy-research community, a job made difficult by the presence of several institutes with multimillion dollar endowments.

The growth and evolution of think tanks in Canada and the United States will provide those engaged in the study of comparative political institutions with much to think about in the coming years, and students of international relations will likely begin to pay closer attention to the role and impact of think tanks on the world stage. Recently, the World Bank Institute, in partnership with several other organizations, including the Washington-based Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), organized a series of meetings with think tanks in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe to consider, among other things, how think tanks in emerging democracies could, with financial assistance from the World Bank and others, promote social, economic, and political reform.⁷ This theme resurfaced at the World Bank's inaugural conference of the Global Development Network (GDN) in Bonn in December 1999. As part of its ongoing efforts to become a "knowledge bank," the World Bank is asking think tanks to help build policy networks between researchers and policymakers both within and across countries.⁸ In the process, the bank hopes that think tanks will become vehicles that can help transform the political landscape of the international community. What remains to be seen is whether these organizations are up to the challenge.

The growing involvement of think tanks in the policy-making process at the national and international levels will give rise to a new set of intriguing questions. Undoubtedly one that will be asked from time to time is, Do think tanks matter? Judging by this analysis of Canadian and American think tanks, it is unlikely that a simple answer will be found.

NEXT STEPS

As the literature on think tanks continues to grow, scholars must keep abreast of what ground has been covered and what still needs to be studied. While much has been written on the think tank landscape in many industrial and developing nations, we still know relatively little about the internal workings of think tanks or how they assess their own impact in the policy-making community. Indeed, as difficult as it is for scholars to arrive at some consensus about how to measure policy influence, think tanks also struggle over how to evaluate their performance. For think tank directors, who must explain to their boards of directors and donor agencies how their resources are being spent and what results they have achieved, providing accurate and worthwhile performance indicators is not merely an academic exercise.

The reality facing think tank directors and those who study their institutions is that there is no single performance indicator that will provide an accurate assessment of what they have achieved relative to other institutes in the policy-making community, an observation consistent with the findings in chapter 5. Under ideal conditions we could assume that all think tanks agree on the same set of indicators and allocate a roughly equal percentage of their budgets to enhancing their performance in each category. After adjusting for differences in revenues and expenditures, scholars could then provide an annual ranking of institutes, perhaps similar to the *Maclean's* ranking of Canadian universities and colleges, which could in turn be passed on to think tanks. The job of think tank directors would then be done. Or would it? What directors of think tanks would be left with is some indication of where they ranked relative to other institutes – for instance, in media citations generated or in testimonies given. Unfortunately, while some think tanks might find comfort in these numbers, others would still be left with the lingering question of how much difference their institutes really made.

A potential solution to this nagging question would be for think tanks not to compare themselves to other policy institutes, although there might be external and internal pressures to do so, but to set out their own measurements of success. By reviewing their mission statements, think tanks could begin the process of identifying what policy

issues they believed were important to study and the various channels they needed to rely on to convey their insights to selected target audiences. Once they had done this, they could then set out the performance indicators that would provide them with some insight into whether they were making progress toward achieving their specific objectives.

In examining the internal workings of think tanks, future researchers in this field will undoubtedly discover that policy institutes will rely on very different benchmarks for success. Some will continue to emphasize the importance of enhancing their media exposure and will closely monitor the number of media citations they receive. Others, however, will likely focus on less visible but potentially more influential channels, such as meetings and conferences with key policymakers. What will be interesting to discover is how think tanks seek to implement their goals while constantly confronting the financial pressures of staying afloat.

Scholars should also pay more attention to what policymakers think about the contribution think tanks have made at different stages of the policy-making process. They could do so either through interviews with or through surveys distributed to policymakers throughout government. A comprehensive survey of the attitudes of policymakers and journalists toward U.S. think tanks was conducted by Andrew Rich, but a similar survey has yet to be released in Canada.⁹ Although some policy institutes have apparently commissioned private polling firms to survey Canadians about their views of think tanks, a more extensive survey of policymakers is needed. The obvious benefit of a survey is that policymakers can be asked specifically which think tanks have contributed to public policy and in what ways. They can also be asked to give examples of where think tanks may have made a difference. Among other things, those examples would allow scholars to develop more complete case studies.

In the case studies included in this book we are left with the impression that by virtue of participating in presidential campaigns some think tanks in the United States have become firmly entrenched in the policy-making process. While this is certainly true for a handful of institutes, the vast majority have not had the privilege of establishing such close ties to government. We are also left with the impression that unlike their American counterparts, think tanks in Canada, have rarely played a critical role in policy development. Although this finding is consistent with the observations made in chapter 7, there are countless other policy issues in which Canadian policy institutes may have played a more decisive role. A survey of policymakers would go a long way toward identifying these areas.

For those looking for a definitive answer to the question posed at the beginning of this book, the conclusion that I have reached may be disappointing. But as in other avenues of scholarly inquiry, we are often left with far more questions than answers. Think tanks are interesting organizations worthy of further scholarly attention, and as their visibility continues to increase, more people will likely question how much impact they have. I anxiously await their responses.

directly to policymakers? However, by tracking which think tanks rely most heavily on the media to promote their views and which depend on other channels to market their ideas, we can look more closely at their involvement at different stages of the policy-making process.

In the following two chapters, I will take a closer look at how a select group of think tanks in the United States and Canada has sought to influence the policy-making environment and specific policy debates. Beginning with a detailed examination of the involvement of several American think tanks in presidential campaigns in chapter 6, I will explore how they have taken advantage of a critical opportunity to influence the policy direction of incoming presidents. In addition to identifying which think tanks have contributed ideas to presidential candidates, some consideration will also be given to why some candidates actively seek the advice of think tanks. Following this, chapter 7 will focus on how a small group of Canadian think tanks became involved in a major policy debate in Canada – the Renewal of Canada Initiative – which was intended to generate public discussion about the future of constitutional reform. Although one must be careful not to generalize about the impact of think tanks by relying on a handful of case studies, the following chapters will highlight the many different ways think tanks can make their presence felt.

CHAPTER SIX

On the Road to the White House: Presidential Candidates and the Think Tanks That Advised Them

In April 1998 Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush interrupted a fundraising trip for a gubernatorial candidate in Northern California to meet with several scholars from the Hoover Institution. The purpose of the meeting, which took place at the home of former secretary of state and Hoover fellow George Shultz, was to allow the governor of Texas to get acquainted with some of the nation's leading policy experts. Although before accepting Shultz's invitation, Bush had little knowledge of the Hoover Institution or the work many of its scholars engaged in, his friendship with Hoover fellow and economist Michael Boskin may explain why Bush gravitated toward the California think tank.¹ As a result of the close to four-hour meeting, Bush "engaged 12 or so Hoover fellows to advise his presidential campaign on issues from taxation to welfare to foreign affairs."² In addition to relying heavily on scholars from the Hoover Institution to help educate him on the intricacies of domestic and foreign policy issues, Bush enlisted the support of several other policy experts, including his top economic adviser, Lawrence Lindsey, former Federal Reserve governor and fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, and Robert Zoellick, who stepped down as president of the Center for Strategic and International Studies after only four months to advise Bush.³

Bush's decision to turn to some of the nation's most prominent think tanks for policy advice is not surprising. Indeed, it has become common for presidential candidates, particularly those who lack experience in federal politics, to establish close ties to think tanks. Eager to find candidates who can help translate their ideas into concrete policy decisions, it has also become common for think tanks to provide much of the intellectual ammunition presidential contenders require to sell their message to the electorate. As Martin Anderson of the Hoover Institution points out, "it is during this period that presidential candidates