

Think-tanks

Tom Bentley – Does Evidence Matter? – ODI – 28 May 2003

Thanks to ODI for inviting me. This is a very broad question so I thought I would start by explaining a bit about what DEMOS is and how it works and then use that to raise a number of questions which remain open about think-tanks. These questions are being debated and, to some extent, decided in practice by the way that different organisations - not just those we traditionally think of as think-tanks - are adapting to the changing policy environment, including its internationalisation.

DEMOS is ten years old this year. It was founded with the humble aim of becoming 'the first political think-tank for the twenty-first century'. If you think back to 1993 and the domestic political climate in Britain, the dominant mood was one of stagnation: a Labour Party that could not work out how to win an election; a Conservative administration that was deeply divided and really fairly exhausted, and the beginning of whole series of fears, anxieties and consciousness of wider change. This was the early stages of the debate about globalisation, what it was and what it might mean.

It is quite interesting to note that we are at a point in the political cycle where many of those questions about political disengagement, disillusionment and disappointment with mainstream politics have returned. While New Labour produced a big rush of energy and has changed quite a lot - both within the Labour Party and in Britain - the underlying questions about politics, power, decision-making and the engagement of citizens in the way that decisions are taken, have not gone away.

DEMOS was founded in part on the propositions that firstly there were a series of long-term questions and transitions to be addressed and secondly, that we could be optimistic about some of the opportunities created by those transitions. Whilst DEMOS does point to many long-term and in some ways low-level crises in our institutional life, it also actively looks for new disciplines, new perspectives and new ideas that might help to generate solutions or, just as importantly, connect solutions and practices in one area of life or society to what is happening elsewhere.

Since it was founded, DEMOS has been through three stages in its life. The first was a start-up phase, a kind of think-tank precursor of the dot.com bubble, in that it appeared very quickly and it rapidly generated a high profile public agenda by publishing a lot of eye-catching ideas and generating a lot of debate, and by putting itself on the map under the guidance of Geoff Mulgan, its founding director, and a number of other leading individuals who created a series of agendas. Then as the prospect of a Labour government took shape and Tony Blair was elected as leader of the Labour Party the year after demos was founded, it became increasingly entwined with the formation of a whole series of new policy agendas and a redrawing of the political landscape. I believe quite firmly that DEMOS' success in becoming part of that redrawing also provoked its first existential crisis, because it is quite difficult for an organisation dedicated to long-term thinking, independence, creativity and lateral connections to be too deeply embedded in a single political project.

So the third stage of life, which we have been working on for the past three years or so, has been to develop and reshape (to some extent to reinvent) the organisation, without losing any of its core themes or commitments. The result is an organisation which aims - I leave you to judge for yourselves how far it succeeds - to be both independent and connected.

I do not think this is the only mode of think-tank life or the only things that a think-tank can do, but DEMOS produces a particular kind of blend of long-term focus and a strong emphasis on conceptual thinking - identifying new perspectives, ideas and language - and then helping to give substance and add flesh to those conceptual agendas by connecting directly with both policy and practice elsewhere. I think it is crucial to understanding what we do and try to do: that we are interested in intellectual innovation and the generation of ideas partly through the ongoing relationship between policy and practice. As New Labour has discovered, the relationship between policy and practice, and the problem of implementation, is probably the most difficult and intractable problem to solve. As some of the energy has drained away from its first few years, the challenges of making institutions which can fit better the contours of our wider environment and express collective desires and needs come out more and more starkly.

The way that DEMOS tries to work in this environment and generate answers in it, is to act as an intellectual intermediary. So DEMOS is associated with a whole series of ideas which, I think, have helped to shape the current political vocabulary: ideas like 'social entrepreneurship'; 'joined-up' government; the creative cities agenda; possibilities of creative learning in schooling and the education system and a whole series of other things.

Much of our work is very empirical, but this is not always the work which generates most attention in the media. As part of our range of activities, we do quite detailed primary research and interpretation of the results. We also work quite deliberately with organisations and institutions, including academic ones, who have particular areas of expertise that might be brought out into the wider public debates.

I think perhaps the most significant development for our discussion today is that we have gradually developed a practice in what you might call 'applied thinking', which involves direct collaboration with partner organisations who are both our funders and our collaborators. I deliberately do not call it consultancy because it involves taking quite concrete and manifest organisational problems and looking at the potential for using broader and more abstract analysis or ideas generated elsewhere to help focus and develop organisational strategies and ways of learning in these specific settings. Examples include a partnership with the National College for School Leadership, a fairly big, new and high-profile New Labour institution which is charged with generating leadership capacity in the school system and has set itself up from scratch over the last three years and is looking for ways to disburse its money and to have the right kind of impact on the system.

Putting the right knowledge in the right places and working out how to build institutions is actually a problem for which many policy-makers are not prepared or equipped. So an approach to think-tanking which includes working out how to learn as you go along and how to transfer knowledge and ideas from one setting to another, including understanding the conditions under which certain kinds of innovation can flourish, is crucially important.

We also do this in local communities. We are working with the North Southwark Education Action Zone at the moment, looking at ways in which their collaborative networking between schools can be linked more strongly with their community development agenda and with the way that they try to engage both businesses and institutions in raising educational attainment overall. We have just finished writing a 'social enterprise strategy' in Hackney, which looks at the potential for networking the social entrepreneurs with the social businesses in ways which might help to produce critical mass and sustainability for that tier of economic activity.

We also do this kind of work with other voluntary organisations, sometimes with Trades Unions and occasionally with firms, although we apply a fairly clear public interest test to our work where companies are concerned, and we always ask ourselves whether or not the ideas and agendas that we are working on could be broadly described as contributing to the public benefit in the long-run.

That is the source of a lot of DEMOS' expertise and, I think, also of its credibility - although it is not necessarily the kind of credibility which will find its way into mainstream media coverage, or the way that politicians and policy-makers in central government will understand it.

Its significance in the new policy environment is really about the long-term importance of policy networks to the degree of 'informedness' with which policy decisions by various institutions are taken in real time, and also the transparency and legitimacy of the way in which those institutions are formed.

Five or ten years ago, words like intermediary and networker tended to be associated with less than legitimate activities, particularly with lobbyists, corporate communications and other forms of 'shadowy influence'. One of the things that is happening, is that more people in more sectors are beginning to realise that networks are a fairly fundamental organisational form and means of communication in every sphere of life and the fact that an idea is communicated by a network is not a test of the credibility or legitimacy of the idea. The question is how we sort out the right questions to be asking under those conditions. It is true, particularly in areas of policy that have been increasingly trans-nationalised, that organising through networks is more or less the only way to create coherent agendas that have a chance of affecting large-scale institutional decision-making. (This is particularly true of the way that policy debate is conducted around Brussels.)

So where does that leave us? I think there is an interesting question about independence and originality. The conventional model of the think-tank is a fairly obvious stereotype of a small group of usually very clever and certainly very 'worldly' people working in a very constrained environment and developing ideas that they somehow manage to push through to other people who are making 'real world' decisions. I think it is less and less like that. My experience of being a think-tank director is increasingly about debating and developing conversations, about forms of interactive communication and the ways in which that can build critical mass for certain ideas. DEMOS is doing this both in the local settings that I was talking about and more and more internationally. For example, we have just launched DEMOS Athens with a partner in Greece, which seemed like

the appropriate place to go; we have just published a big study on migration policy and strategies for Europe which arises from a collaboration with Dutch policy-makers and which I hope will lead to more international partnership work; we are working with partners in Scandinavia and so on. But rather than simply trying to replicate the organisational model that we have based in London, we are doing it by building a series of collaborative relationships which are distinctive in themselves, are appropriate to their local context and which, we hope, over-time will take the form of a network itself and add to an overall conversation and exchange of ideas which goes far beyond the core set of activities that are under our direction in London.

How those kinds of network-based exchanges fit in with the structure of government or of the established media and how they get funded and financed are open questions. The way in which we try to protect our independence is not to look for unrestricted core funding because there is very little of this around (and I find it sometimes has quite significant strings attached anyway), but rather to apply a golden editorial rule to what we produce, which is that however much money or other resources a partner might be contributing, they get no formal control over what we decide or over what we decide to publish. That quite often results in negotiated conflicts with our funders. We have just had an example of this where, having finished a big study on workforce development in the museums, galleries and libraries sector, we then published a pamphlet by someone else attacking the whole policy edifice and strategy for libraries which resulted in fairly intense local controversy. I see that kind of intellectual challenge as being fundamental to sustaining the role that DEMOS has marked out for itself.

The other route to independence is to operate transparently as this intermediary hovering between sectors and to try to diversify our funding and revenue sources sufficiently that we do not depend in any way on any one sector or institution. Although the transaction costs in doing that may be quite high (it means you have to manage a lot of relationships and understand a lot of sectors), it fits very well in the long-run with our mission to learn from anywhere and everywhere.