

Think-tanks

Simon Maxwell – Does Evidence Matter? – ODI – 28 May 2003

Whenever I think about what we do (at ODI), I think about people like Tom Bentley at DEMOS because of the verve that they bring to this whole enterprise of trying to change policy and practice - that is what our mission statement says: we want to 'inspire and inform policy and practice' which change the world. A number of the things which you talked about are really relevant, such as the intermediation and the combining of the theory with the applied.

Matthew Taylor, who runs the Institute of Public Policy Research, once described think-tanks as having a three-fold function: a liquid function, a solid function and a gaseous function. The gaseous function is not just hot air, it is about changing the way that people think about an issue, changing the zeitgeist. The solid function is about changing the core, concrete ideas that inform a shift in policy. And the liquid is trickling down between the interstices of government, working with partners and the private sector to try to make those things happen. Of course, there is also an interaction or iteration between the solid, liquid and gaseous functions.

However, and although we are in the same business, I do think that at one level DEMOS has it easy. I wanted to start with Edward Heath and the question (not just a Daily Mail question) of 'who governs Britain'. We know that if you ask that question you lose the election, but the fact is that most of the decisions that we (at ODI) work on are decisions taken by lots of different actors. Debt relief, for example, does not happen because Gordon Brown or Clare Short want it. It happens because they can produce a consensus in the G8 and then sell that to the interim committee of the Fund. Trade liberalisation happens not because President Chirac makes a particular proposal for the G8, but because somehow it gets carried through the European Union and the World Trade Organisation.

All the decisions that we are involved in are multi-actor, multi-polar decisions, so the policy process which we are trying to influence is as much in Zimbabwe or Zambia as it is in London. That is an enormously complicated exercise for us.

How do we do it?

One model I carry in my head draws on the experience of Anthony Fisher. Fisher was a British Royal Air Force pilot in the second World War who, after the war, went to the United States and saw the first broiler-house chickens. At the time, they did not have these in Britain. He came back and founded Buxted chickens, made a fortune and decided to invest his money in promulgating the ideas of his hero, Hayek. He founded the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), which went on to become a leading driver of the neo-liberal revolution that found its apotheosis around the time of Margaret Thatcher. There were other think-tanks involved, like the Centre for Policy Studies, which I think was Keith Joseph's vehicle. There is a book about this experience of the neo-liberal revolution in Britain which describes the way in which a dozen people changed the face of Britain, through dining clubs, pamphlets, parliamentary debates, key links into ministries, working on the next manifesto - the kinds of things that DEMOS has always done very well.

But Anthony Fisher was not satisfied with just doing it in the UK, he had global ambitions. So he founded the Atlas Foundation, which still exists. Its mission is to set up like-minded think-tanks around the world which will promulgate free-market ideas. They are quite unabashed about it. Lots of think-tanks are very unabashed about their political leanings, but what is particularly interesting about Atlas is this focus on the internationalisation of ideas and policy processes. Of course, we think we have discovered globalisation, but it is not new: the IEA was founded in 1957.

That, then, is the challenge: how do we internationalise the policy processes?

Tom Bentley focused on networks, which is absolutely the right topic. There are, needless to say, hundreds of think-tanks around the world. We are involved in the European Association of Development Institutes, which has over one hundred and fifty institutional members around Europe (including not just the EU but accession countries and others). Most of the members are small, some are political, many of them are universities and most have an academic bent. But there the network is and the question is how we use it.

I have been thinking about this problem, and there seem to be three kinds of approach to using networks. The first is the Microsoft model. It is hegemonic: you switch on your computer anywhere in the world and you are using software produced by one company based in Seattle. So we could, as DEMOS seems to be doing, set up a network of think-tanks, all branded ODI. They would all be exactly the same and our empire would extend from coast to coast, but that would be a very bad model for us because that kind of hegemonic, dominating, monopolist of ideas is probably a bad idea intellectually, but also all of these places have histories, there is a path dependency and there is no way that we could take over think-tanks around the world and nor should we.

The second model I call the McDonald's model. It looks a bit like Microsoft but actually it is largely a franchise operation. Most McDonald's outlets are owned by local people, so there is strong local ownership and so on, but the fact is that every time you walk through the door you get the same hamburger, whether it is an Indian or a Swedish version, it is basically the same product. Aside from problems of fat, sugar and salt, there is a homogenisation issue which is also rather inappropriate to the kind of intellectual debate that we want to foment. Although, as I will come back to in a moment, it is not an entirely hopeless model.

Looking around for ideas, the third model I came to was the airline alliance model. What is interesting about airline alliances is that all the airlines are independently owned, they make their own decisions about aircrafts, routes, maintenance schedules, uniforms, food, charging and so on, but they work together in some kind of loose alliance, so that when you put your baggage on a plane in Ljubljana and transfer planes (you hope) it will end up in Heathrow when you arrive with a different airline. The highest form of that alliance is code sharing, where you get on a plane to Brussels and it is British Airways / Sabena switching backwards and forwards - one plane but two different airlines.

So I have been working on the idea of 'policy code sharing' and how we might use this idea of the airline alliance to work with partners in our networks around the world on the same topics and, with luck, producing the same kinds of results. So it is not McDonalds, it looks a bit like homogenisation but we try to retain independence and explicitly try to improve the degree of coordination. We know from the airlines that it is a difficult job to pull off because you need to cross-guarantee quality and standards across very different companies and you need a high degree of trust to make policy code sharing work.

We have some examples of incipient networks. The Global Development Network which we have talked about in this meeting series is an institution with which we are very much involved within ODI. This is not yet policy code sharing and is a rather loose structure of academics and intellectuals around the world. However, its annual conferences will involve people from seventy or eighty countries.

We are trying something different on what we think is a very important emerging agenda on the future of European development cooperation. I will not go into the details of what we are trying to do now, except to say that there is a whole series of decisions about to take place on Europe - the Convention is the least of it. The accession of new members will take place in 2004. There are elections to take place next year which will mean the reconfiguration of the Commission; there are the trade talks in Mexico this autumn; there is a renegotiation of the European budget, beginning next year; there is a midterm review of the European development fund - a whole series of things. We need to take that agenda and work on it not just as one country but as twenty-five countries who by next year will be the members of the European Union.

So what we are trying to do is create something that looks like an airline alliance model. We are calling it the 'all-star alliance', and setting it up through the European Association of Development Institutes. We are trying to put policy code sharing into practice. The project takes the form of a background paper prepared jointly by us and our partners in the Netherlands, the European Centre for Development Policy Management, a shared website hosted by EUFORIC and what we hope will be a series of parallel meetings taking place in as many as fifteen countries around Europe over the next six to nine months. We are starting our own series in June and we have already signed up the Secretary of State, Chris Patten, Glenys Kinnock, Baroness Symons, Sally Keeble from DFID and a range of other people, with civil society counterparts, to try to debate all these issues about enlargement and the EDF and so on. We will post our findings on the website, hope that others will do the same and will, just as Tom Bentley says, be creating and developing a conversation around Europe using the 'all-star alliance' model.

We are not quite as single-minded as Anthony Fisher and we are certainly not as committed to a free-market ideology, but we do think that the Atlas model is one that we ought to be looking at: a way of building a network of think-tanks that will retain their personality but work together. This is a huge challenge - not least for us working in developing countries - because it is so difficult both to find capacity in developing countries and to fund it. Funding ODI equivalents (not ODI names but equivalents) is one of the most urgent tasks we face if we are fulfil our mission and theirs, which is to inspire and inform policy change.