

Think-tanks

Mark Garnett – Does Evidence Matter? – ODI – 28 May 2003

It was lovely to hear two people with such enthusiasm for the work of think-tanks and in fact their enthusiasm was so infectious that I think I should feel duty-bound to throw a bucket of cold water over it and sound even more cynical about think-tanks than I really am. It goes without saying that these remarks have nothing to do with Tom Bentley's work or Simon Maxwell's work. I just want to utter a few perhaps cautionary remarks about think-tanks.

The term think-tank is one which has very strong positive connotations. It implies objective, evidence-based research and a group of people who are dedicated to improving government policy because they themselves are impressed by the evidence which they research. I think that the history of think-tanks in Britain suggests that the term is now being banded about rather indiscriminately.

It is possible to identify four waves of think-tanks that we have had in Britain. The first was the Fabians at the end of the nineteenth century: a group of ideologically committed people who were also very much committed to evidence-based research.

Then in the 1930s there was a wave of think-tanks in political and economic planning, like the National Institute for Economic and Social Research, who were less ideological than the Fabians and more committed to evidence-based research. These think-tanks conform as far as I think it is possible to the ideal model of a think-tank: one which is not driven by a desire to change the world for ideological reasons but by a desire to improve the flow of information to governments and provide independent sources of information. The 1930s were in my view a heyday for think-tanks.

In the post-war period, the Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA) heralded a wave of unashamedly ideological think-tanks who harped back to the days of the Fabians and wanted to do Fabianism in reverse, to roll back the state which the Fabians had helped to roll forward. These think-tanks were the first group to bring the whole term into question and into discredit because they were not doing any independent research, they had their minds made up before they started doing any research whatsoever and their conclusions were written for them as extreme free-market economic liberals. These are pressure groups and not think-tanks.

One of the things about this wave of think-tanks which is particularly dangerous is that they were effective at attracting funds. Small businessmen who became bigger businessmen, like Anthony Fisher, loved the IEA and CPS and the plethora of alphabet soup think-tanks which we have now. The Social Market Foundation for example, what is that? Because it is seen as being a think-tank, people think that it has intellectual credibility and so to have Social Market Foundation behind your speaking head when you are government minister is supposed to add intellectual credibility. These are hollowed out shells of think-tanks and you can see why this happens: think-tanks thrive on media headlines and publicity because that is how they get their funding.

That third wave of think-tanks heralded the fourth, which is where we are now: a wave of post-modern think-tanks which no longer have the ideological thrust of the third wave of think-tanks because ideology is dead, we are all economic liberals now. (In fact this shows that ideology is not dead it is just that none of us have the nous to think in an independent way.) The fourth wave is entirely devoted to headline chasing which means that long-term research is at a premium - you cannot do it, you have to get the headlines. This is what Tom Bentley was talking about in the early days of DEMOS. They were brilliant at getting headlines but it was not clear that the very skilful, enthusiastic, young people involved in DEMOS had a lot of experience at running anything. They were just very good writers and publicity chasers. It seems that DEMOS now has a vision of being like the second wave of think-tanks and it may well be not a coincidence that I have not heard very much from DEMOS recently, but actually a good thing reflecting the fact that it now has a proper ethos as an organisation which merits the term think-tank.

I think that there are lots of good reasons for saying that think-tanks no longer fulfil that definition of a think-tank which gives intellectual credibility and carries the positive connotations of think-tanks. I do not think that the best known think-tanks fulfil this role anymore and this means that a development which could have been a great blessing to people - not only to governments who would get better information from independent sources but also to the public who would benefit from the pluralism of competing sources of information produced by independent groups - has not done so. Neither of those things can be said to be happening any more in Britain.

I think in terms of the developing world, think-tanks in countries which are less economically blessed than the United States and Britain are really bodies of lackeys who are given state funding by politicians who want to get intellectual credibility. This is certainly the case in a recently developed country such as Malaysia and in places where there is not such a democratic or pluralistic ethos.

My personal view is that the most positive role that think-tanks could play in developing countries is already being played by non-governmental organisations across the board. Charities who have the expertise actually to make life better for people in those particular countries seem to obviate the need for developing a think-tank world in these countries. I think that we should draw on the existing expertise of people and I cannot see that their job could be done better by organisations called think-tanks. The dividing line between pressure groups and think-tanks is already very difficult to identify and the job of helping developing countries should go to the people with the practical knowledge they have derived from working on the ground.