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Think tanks and their role in public policy

Introduction

Think tanks are organisations that undertake research on, and promote understanding of, public policy issues. They are well established in many countries and are recognised as playing a significant role in contributing to good quality policy making.

This note explains what think tanks are and how they operate generally, and specifically the role of the Policy Centre Jersey.

The concept of a think tank

A think tank is an organisation, which can take one of many forms, that works in a defined area of public policy by undertaking and promoting authoritative research and providing a forum for discussion. The keyword is "authoritative". The effectiveness of a think tank depends on the reputation it has for quality of its work.

There are two basic types of think tank, which can be illustrated by examples in the UK.

The first type has no political affiliation or leaning and generally covers broad areas. In the UK the most prominent such think tanks are –

The Institute of Government. Its website sets out its role –

> The Institute for Government works to make UK government more effective through rigorous research, open discussion and fresh thinking. We do this by:
>
> a. Undertaking high quality research, providing analysis of the key challenges facing government, and making compelling recommendations for change.
> b. Offering a space for discussion and fresh thinking to help senior politicians and public servants think differently about how government can be better.
> c. Promoting informed public debate about effective government, including by providing platforms for leading international experts to exchange ideas.
>
> We are an independent, non-partisan charity and work with all political parties.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies, the website of which states that it "is the UK's leading independent economics research institute. Our world-class research helps policymakers – and those who hold them accountable – understand the impact that policy decisions have on individuals, households and businesses."

Chatham House, the mission of which is "to help governments and societies build a sustainable, secure, prosperous and just world. We deliver our mission through dialogue, research and leadership." Chatham House is the leading foreign policy think tank.

Resolution Foundation describes itself as is "an independent think-tank focused on improving the living standards of those on low-to-middle incomes. We work across a wide range of economic and social policy, combining our core purpose with a commitment to analytical rigour."

The Centre for European Reform is devoted to making the EU work better and strengthening its role in the world. It provides expert analysis on developments in the European Union and relations between it and the UK.

Because these think tanks are independent, objective and authoritative their work is widely quoted in the media and their chief executives are frequently asked to comment on radio and TV and in the print media - Hannah White for the Institute of Government, Helen Miller for the Institute for Fiscal Studies, Bronwen Maddox for Chatham House and Charles Grant for the Centre for European Reform.

The second type also produce authoritative research but have a political alignment and work closely with political parties. In the UK the Institute for Public Policy Research is the best-known left-leaning think tank and the Centre for Policy Studies is one of a number of right-leaning think tanks.

Think tanks are typically companies limited by guarantee and many have charitable status.

Think tanks are different from pressure groups which have a policy objective often evident from their title such as, for example, the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, the Child Poverty Action Group and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

They are also different from interest groups, which have a role in representing a particular group in society. These include trade associations that represents sectors of the economy, trades unions, and charities such as Cancer Research UK and Age Concern.

However, the dividing line between these groups is blurred. Many interest and pressure groups use their specialist knowledge to produce authoritative research. Again, the key point is the word “authoritative”. Regardless of the nature of the organisation if it is trusted for the quality of its work then it can be effective, but clearly those organisations that are seen to represent a particular interest group have to go to some lengths to establish that their work is authoritative.

Funding

Think tanks are funded by donations, sponsorship and in some cases income from commissioned research. The independent think tanks received substantial support from the business community and charitable foundations and also are frequently commissioned to conduct research by governments and other organisations. The funding can either be general sponsorship for their activities through an annual donation or sponsorship of specific projects.

Think tanks that are affiliated with political groupings rely more heavily for their core funding on personal donations by individuals either directly or through companies in which they are involved. However, they may also be commissioned to do research by other organisations.

Method of operation

Think tanks all have a broadly similar method of operation. Their key output is authoritative research. The large think tanks employ permanent research staff and many also have advisors who help on specific projects.

However, merely producing good research is not adequate as think tanks seek to influence public policy. For this reason they also run discussion meetings ranging from small round tables to conferences. These help to engage a network of relevant people and to disseminate the results of research and provide an opportunity for discussion, which all enhance the ability of the think tank to influence policy outcomes.

Think tanks also need to be fully up-to-speed on public policy issues, knowing where research would be productive in terms of influencing policy. There are close relationships between politicians, journalists and think tanks. The politically aligned think tanks are used to do research particularly for the main opposition party but also for groupings within political parties. Think tanks can be used both to do research which can help inform policy but also to float ideas in a way that a politician cannot. For example, in the Jersey context, a politician might take the view that it is wrong that the elderly have free bus travel but that young working people do not. For the politician to state this would not be electorally popular as the old vote more than the young, but the climate of opinion

can be changed through a think tank producing authoritative research and promoting discussion.

The Policy Centre Jersey

The Policy Centre Jersey is a think tank established in 2023 which comes into the independent category. The vision of the Institute for Government set out earlier in this paper sets out what the Policy Centre Jersey is seeking to be. It also meets two previously unfilled needs in Jersey -

> Its Knowledge Centre comprises a series of papers on all aspects of Jersey designed particularly for use in schools but also providing essential basic information on matters such as the political system and the Island's constitution.
>
> It publishes 30 policy briefs, each summarising issues in a specific area and government policy, and providing links to relevant papers.

These two activities are not basic think tank activities, but they were much needed in Jersey and also helped to establish the Policy Centre as a reputable organisation producing authoritative studies relevant to public policy in Jersey.

The Policy Centre has already published ten substantive research reports - election turnout, housing and social mobility, university education on-Island, problem gambling, low income, social mobility, improving the consultation process, religion, the construction industry and secondary education. It also publishes shorter think pieces from named authors.

It has held a number of well-attended discussion meetings which have provided a forum for high quality policy discussion that previously has not been available in jersey.

However, the Centre still has a long way to go to meet its objectives. It has now begun to attract funding which will enable it to expand the work that it does and it is keen to do so in a number of areas including housing, poverty and social mobility.