

Think-tanks in a Western Australian and Australian Context

This presentation today draws on my experience working in think-tanks both in Australia and the US, but more importantly from asking questions to those who are much more experienced than me and experimenting with different formats and structures.

What is a think-tank?

Firstly, what is a think tank?

When I first told my friends I worked in a think-tank, they were puzzled and remarked about sitting in bean bags pondering life or took it in a literal sense and believed that I was physically in some kind of tank like a goldfish.

The other popular view of think tanks is a glamorous lifestyle briefing ministers and commenting in the media.

Both views are far from the truth.

Think-tank work, at its core, is to bring ideas and policy options into the light of day and convey them to decision makers in the hope that these ideas are adopted, implemented or even stolen. In many ways, the things which think-tanks do is the very opposite of intellectual property lawyers.

There is a wide variety of think-tank models. However, one central theme runs across them all: the involvement of people with a belief and passion for a particular idea or set of ideas.

This is important to note as there are many ways to enjoying a lucrative income and being in think-tanks is not one of them. I found this out when I had to recruit for an organisation that I worked for and, despite the talent of applicants, if the first question was what is the salary range, they would likely be unsuitable.

My ideal candidate for a think-tank entry role was a mythical person who could get a job with McKinsey but work for a third of the income.

These organisations are generally run as not-for-profits, relatively small and often operate on a shoestring budget. Some are very successful, some fade away into obscurity and others achieve their aim and put themselves out of business. For example, following the reunification of Germany, a think-tank which had this as its stated aim would have no real reason to continue functioning. In essence, think-tanks are institutions which serve to promote ideas rather than the institution itself.

Think-tanks convey ideas by producing pamphlets, papers, books or running events such as these. As there is not a defined career path in this area it tends to combine older, experienced leaders with young, enthusiastic and hardworking staff with a fairly high level of turnover.

Think-tanks in Australia

The model of think-tanks playing a role in public policy in Australia is relatively new, although it should be noted that there are some very old think-tanks in Australia; for example the Institute of Public Affairs.

A number of think-tanks have emerged in the past couple of decades, with the last five to ten years seeing the fastest growth.

In Australia, think-tanks have the following characteristics:

- Broad or narrow;
- Left, right or a particular issue;
- Now morphing into advocacy lobby groups i.e. getup!;
- Not the home for the alternative government as in the US; and
- Starting to follow the US trend of narrowing areas of focus, less research and more advocacy.

Conservative/Free Market/ Libertarian

On the conservative/free market/libertarian side of politics there are the following organisations:

- Centre for Independence Studies (Sydney)
- Institute for Public Affairs (Melbourne)
- Mannkal (Perth)
- Menzies Research Centre (Liberal Party think tank)

Foreign Policy/Defence (areas I have greater expertise in)

Each of the following organisations specialise on a particular theme within the foreign policy and defence topic:

- Australian Strategic Policy Institute
- Lowy Institute
- Future Directions International

Examples of success in think tank work

In conclusion, think tanks can make a difference. Although for every one success, there are likely ten, even a hundred failures. Two examples of success in the world of think-tanks are:

- ASPI Solomon Island report which provided template for RAMSI
- FDI energy paper in 2005 that laid the foundation for the nuclear power debate.

Summing up, for those entering the work force, time spent in think-tanks will prepare you for a career in public policy debates, whether it be advocating, commenting or leading.