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ON THE DRY SIDE 415

The New-Right Think-Tanks

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Independent public-policy think-tanks have been a feature of Australian politics since the Institute of Public Affairs was founded in 1943. The ravings of conspiracy theorists aside, however, until recently, political scientists have shown little interest in them.

Public-policy think-tanks with explicit social and political philosophies are to be found on both sides of the collectivist-individualist divide---for instance, there is the collectivist Evatt Foundation and the individualist Centre for Independent Studies. As well as having philosophical positions the organisations share other characteristics: each is independent of the government; enters the political debate; and has a minuscule budget, compared with that of, say, a university department. Most importantly, neither is for hire to vested interests.

The think tanks of this independent type which adhere to the liberal-capitalist philosophy have been dubbed, not very helpfully, 'new right'. They include the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) and the Australian Institute for Public Policy (AIPP) which are in the process of merging, the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS), the Sydney Institute, the Tasman Institute, the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE), and the HR Nichols Society. Between them, these organisations command annual budgets of not more than \$5 million. They, nevertheless, stand accused by opponents of causing the withdrawal of hundreds of millions of government subsidies and of ending regulations that brought about transfers between private people of even greater sums.

'New-right' is a poor description of them. The largest new-right organisation, the IPA, is hardly new, and the new-right's philosophy is not new either. Indeed, the essentials of liberal capitalism---the rule of law, equality before the law, freedom, property, security and the right to resist oppression---were guaranteed by the 'Declaration of Human and

Civil Rights' at the time of the French Revolution by what was then called 'the left'. Further, if 'right' implies 'authoritarian', the 'new-right' think-tanks are certainly not on the right. I have, nevertheless, given up arguing, and will use the term.

The new-right's principal opponent is no longer socialism. As an intellectual force, socialism is all but dead. As the Nobel Laureate, Professor James Buchanan, pointed out in last year's Bonython Lecture, liberal society's opponent of longest standing is not an ideology of any sort, but vested interest. Professor Buchanan was brought to Australia by the CIS.

To take a current example: defenders of the Australian Wool Corporation and the wool reserve-price do not argue their cause in terms of the advantages of social control of the means of distribution and exchange, although that is what, in fact, they advocate. Instead, they advance the extraordinary proposition that the demand for wool is as great or greater at a higher price than at a lower. Private holders of wool stocks and those who have reputations invested in the reserve-price scheme---that is, the relevant vested interests---weave extraordinary fantasies rather than employ the discredited socialist rhetoric.

However slowly, government is now in retreat. The new-right's success is linked to the failure of socialism, it is true, but its success is not accidental. The alternative small-government policies were made politically acceptable by hard work, and much of that work was done by institutes. These think-tanks have no power, that is nobody does their bidding. But they do have influence.

Influence is, however, a more easily squandered commodity than power. And, of course, like most other organisations, the Australian new-right think-tanks have, from time to time, suffered from errors of judgement which have reduced their influence. But, by and large, they have used their small resources well.

They have not wasted them counting the Angels on the heads of pins. Neither have they repeated arguments long since won---even though this practice is often recommended by subscribers. And they have, in spite of what is said about them by people who would sooner not fund them, not spoken only to people of like mind. There is no lexicon of words and phrases that are only properly understood by the new-right itself. They pride themselves on using only plain English. They have few ikons and no recognisable demonology.

With a few exceptions, people who write and speak for the think-tanks are not strident (or have had the stridency edited out of their drafts). Their arguments are deliberately couched in language that is acceptable to most people and the symbolism they employ is the symbolism that most Australians are happy with. The values they appeal to are those of most Australians.

The discipline is not accidental. The only arguments worth bothering with are those that are initially not shared by most Australians. And, if given half a chance, people misrepresent the advice and motives of those who campaign against the privileges to which they are accustomed. Therefore, every think-tank executive must husband his own and his organisation's standing and credibility.

Politicians also do all of these things. The best of them also ration their political influence, employing it selectively to get people to change their minds. (Thatcher's judgement failed her with the poll tax costing her influence she could have used for more important things.) The more effective think-tanks learned how to woo and win support by watching politics.

Think-tanks, however, have advantages that politicians can only envy. Because think-tanks do not face frequent elections and are not constrained by the atypical minorities that dominate political parties or by panicky back-benchers, they can afford to get much further ahead of the debate than politicians can. The policies that the institutes advocate are usually also supported in private by at least some politicians' who dare not espouse them in public.

In short, the think-tanks came into existence because of a weakness inherent in politics and they have a definite, limited role in the democratic process. To undertake that role they have developed their own professionalism.

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