

NBR In Depth

The new thought leaders

INITIATIVE MATTERS

Oliver Hartwich



The most interesting policy ideas nowadays do not come out of political parties' research departments, let alone their front benches

Opinion polls for the UK Conservative Party certainly do not look good.

According to the latest Guardian/ICM poll, the Tories are down to a mere 31% with their Liberal Democrat coalition partner at 15% and the Labour Party at 39% respectively.

On these figures, Prime Minister David Cameron would be thrown out of office at the next election. That is if he is not toppled by his own party before, which looks increasingly likely.

Despite the political mood being clearly against them, of all newspapers it was the left-leaning *Independent* that declared the Tories the thought-leaders in British politics. Not the party itself, to be clear, but their intellectual supporters. The newspaper's columnist Owen Jones, a former trade union and parliamentary Labour party researcher, did not hide his admiration for his political foes (see <http://ind.pn/15RE4cs>).

Although Mr Cameron may be gone soon and his party with him, Jones argued, political discourse in the UK is now dominated by conservative and free market thinkers. These had organised themselves in networks and think tanks to form a "booming right-wing intelligentsia."

Jones, the self-described "fourth generation socialist" from a family of communists and Trotskyists (which may explain his choice of words), openly congratulated his ideological opponents: "They are thriving. They are full of intellectual energy and creativity, churning out radical ideas on a daily basis," he wrote – and called on his comrades to learn from the new agenda-setters.

I must confess that I found Jones' piece at once correct and slightly comical. It was comical because his language is reminiscent of an old-style ideological class war that I had presumed dead since the end of the Cold War. The nonsensical Left versus Right battles are now so antiquated that I am surprised to find them in the writings of someone almost a decade younger than me. Is it really 1962 again?

However, Jones has a point when he says the political landscape of Britain is not shaped by political parties anymore. The most interesting ideas nowadays do not come out of the parties' research departments, let alone their front benches. They are not thought of in the ivory towers of academia, either. And they certainly don't originate from government bureaucracies.

The role of thought leaders has almost exclusively migrated to about a dozen or so think tanks working in and around Westminster. It is in these privately funded non-government organisations that future governments' programmes are developed. Practically every major project of the UK government – the free schools movement, planning liberalisation and welfare reform – can be traced back to a think tank publication.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should explain that I was myself part of this London think tank scene. I was chief economist at Policy Exchange, an outfit with close links to Mr Cameron, when the Tories were still in opposition. And of course I am now heading the New Zealand Initiative, which is New Zealand's newest think tank.

I have seen first-hand how the ideas, policies and proposals that we first thought of at Policy Exchange made it into the Tories' manifesto and later were implemented when Mr Cameron took office.

Why thinktanks have the best ideas

Locally elected police commissioners were first proposed by my colleague Anna Reid – and introduced last year. Another colleague, Charlotte Leslie (now the MP for Bristol North West), invented the UK government's "pupil premium" to provide extra funding to schools to support their disadvantaged pupils. And I can claim some responsibility for the establishment of the Office for Budget Responsibility and the liberalisation of housing policies just announced by new Planning Minister Nicholas Boles (who was my boss at Policy Exchange).

It is perhaps not so surprising that, given the right people and moderate resources, think tanks may come up with good policy ideas. The real question is: Why do universities and bureaucracies not outcompete them?

The UK civil service employs almost half a million people, including around 32,000 in core Whitehall departments. There are thousands of academic economists, lawyers, sociologists and political scientists at higher education institutions. And yet, perhaps a couple of hundred think tank people write the political agenda and set the political climate.

This may seem odd at first but in a way it isn't. For academics, focused mainly on getting published in prestigious journals, giving

policy advice does not help them promote their careers. Quite the opposite, actually. And ministerial mandarins certainly know their fields but what are the chances they are allowed the freedom to speak out and challenge conventional wisdom?

In previous times, journalists may have also provided more inspiration to policy-makers. But after recent rounds of cost cutting in the media, and with more and more pressure heaped on them, they do not fulfil this role as much as they used to.

This really leaves it to think tanks to do policy relevant research, identify new ways of tackling political problems and then promote their findings to policymakers, the media and the public.

As a matter of fact, it is not just happening on the Tory side of politics. When they were in office, Labour prime ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown often listened to think tanks such as Demos and the Institute for Public Policy Research.

In the end, it does not matter which think tank comes up with new proposals. What matters is that think tankers do their jobs properly. That their work is based on a sound understanding of theory and backed up by good empirical research, ideally by also looking inspiration abroad.

Once you have done that, to be effective as a public policy think tank you need to be able to explain your findings in a language easily understood by your target audience. You better leave jargon to academics wishing to impress their peers.

Good research and effective communication is all it takes to shake and to shape the policy agenda. That's what we did at Policy Exchange, and that's what The New Zealand Initiative is about.

The *Independent's* Owen Jones may be impressed by the new and radical ideas dominating the political discourse in the UK. That he doesn't agree with them in a way doesn't matter. It's far more important to have a good debate on the issues that crucial for a country's future – even if the politicians implementing them might not necessarily get re-elected.

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