

UNIVERSITIES, PRACTITIONERS AND A THINK TANK : A QUEENSLAND CASE STUDY¹

Roger Scott and Ann Scott

1. The Purposes of a Think Tank

A succinct definition of the role and purposes of think tanks was provided by Diane Stone in her discussion of the international version of this widespread organizational type:

Think tanks represented custom-designed organisations for brokering academic research to an educated lay public, for synthesising or translating dense theoretical work or statistical data into manageable artifacts for use in policy making; and for then ‘spinning’ or communicating these policy relevant items to political parties, bureaucrats and other decision-makers or regulators.

The effectiveness, and legitimacy, of think tanks within the public sphere rests in the analytical service they (claim to) render in connecting ‘research and the real world’, ‘knowledge and power’, ‘science and politics’.

Ideas matter but so do interests. While policy research and analysis may be under-girded by sophisticated and rigorous methodologies in order to produce an evidence base for decision-making, nevertheless such analysis enters a political domain where it can be distorted or put towards uses other than intended.²

It was this political domain that has loomed large in the story we have to tell. Our case study describes the establishment of the TJRyan Foundation to fill a gap we perceived existed in the Queensland scene – the absence of academic analysis of policy alternatives from a progressive viewpoint. We wanted in particular to help fill the void left by the removal of public service policy support previously available to the Queensland State ALP during its long period in office. Practitioners who had been the mainstay of policy initiatives were suddenly unavailable - many left voluntarily, otherwise were dismissed and the remainder settled in to meeting the very different expectations of the successor regime. This has allowed the current LNP government a high level of freedom from serious scrutiny despite its many radical policy changes.

¹ Paper given at the conference of the International Society for Research on Public Sector Management (ISRPSM), April 2014.

² Stone, G, ‘The Group of 20 Transnational Policy Community: Governance Networks, Policy Analysis and Think Tanks’, Public Policy Network Conference (PPNC), University of Canberra, January 2014, pp. 3-4.

We believe that our experience of setting up the Foundation and its early history allows some general conclusions to be drawn about the problems of operationalising linkages between higher education institutions and public sector practitioners through the institution of the think tank. Government itself represents an intervening variable which can shape the interests and attitudes of both parties.³

A paper by Rebecca Santos at a very recent gathering of the Australian Public Policy Network suggested that:

There is a burgeoning anxiety regarding Australia's comparative citizen disengagement from government and a greater interest in more citizen focussed policy production methods within contemporary Western public services.

Santos examined a report, commissioned by the previous national ALP government, from a very senior and experienced public servant:

The Moran Report highlighted and advocated for a specific form of citizen engagement, 'policy co-production', broadly understood to be a way of making public policy or designing services through an equal, reciprocal, collaborative partnership of both lay citizens and public servants. It argued strongly for the greater use of policy co-production. This is because co-production was seen as a way to shift (or appear to shift) the balance of power, responsibility and resources from professionals towards policy beneficiaries/ service users and, ultimately, this democratisation of power complemented the new government's need to demarcate itself from its predecessors by being seen as innovative, consultative and collaborative.⁴

We will argue that universities in general and the academics within them have an obligation to engage in this process in building that 'reciprocal, collaborative relationship of both lay citizens and public servants' because they have at their disposal the expertise needed to promote the 'stakeholder engagement' now so fashionable among policy theorists, and thus to shift the balance of power alluded to above.

In the academic world, the presentation of intellectual material in popular form is generally looked down upon. ... It is, I feel, a central duty for those of us working within academia to take the material that we do research on and to discuss it publicly, to make public – in some form and in some way – the knowledge that we have spent years gathering and shaping.⁵

If this argument is accepted, a key question arises: who among the academics on offer are suitably qualified to be regarded as experts whose views are worthy of consideration.

³ Santos, R 'Toward greater citizen engagement?: A Multiple Streams analysis of the Moran review of the Australian Public Service and its advocacy for the greater use of citizen focused policy making methods', PPNC, p 1.

⁴ Santos R, p 4.

⁵ Christensen, C, 'The Public Professor: Dissent in Commodified Higher Education Or ... What Kind of University Will My Daughter Attend in 2027?' <http://www.juancole.com/2013/12/professor-commodified-education.html>

2. Identifying experts - the reliability of networks

Most think tanks have budgets derived from institutional support, including business organisations, political parties, trade unions, and - in one notable case in Australia - collectives of universities acting as sponsors. This last example, *The Conversation*, makes a significant impact through the contributions of well-known journalist-academics and encourages further circulation of its output through generous rules of access. Many (but notably not all) Queensland universities subscribe, and contributions are also accepted from staff from non-subscribing institutions, so there is significant overlap of 'membership' in Queensland with the Ryan Foundation Research Associates. This 'curating' of material prepared elsewhere remains an important element in think tanks, whose aim is to reach a specialist audience interested in a wide cross-section of policy areas.

The question must be faced that the process of networking, through which members have received invitations to join the Foundation as Research Associates, has significant limitations. As there are no direct pecuniary incentives, the choice to make new contributions and/or amend old ideas for popular consumption is at base motivated by a desire to be heard. The political culture of an authoritarian government (described below) can create a feeling of impotence when criticisms go unremarked in the public arena. In the case of Queensland, since its election in March 2012 the LNP government had been taking overt measures to restrict any form of criticism, aided by an often-compliant media (particularly the local Brisbane newspaper owned by Rupert Murdoch).

The Foundation offers a means to connect policy specialists with shared interests, including people inside the public bureaucracy who are constrained to play only a passive role. But informal networks are inherently unreliable and academics have unpredictable, competing priorities and demands on their time. Indeed, 'demand' is too strong a word in this context, as academics are peculiarly privileged in choosing how to spend their time compared to bureaucrats in the public or private sector. The network will also have uneven distribution of credibility and standing in the policy specialisations its members claim to cover.

Two scholars have proved helpful to us from their perspective as research officers in the Parliamentary Library in Canberra. Thomas and Buckmaster⁶ have offered a conceptual guide to the connection between experts and public policy which exemplifies the choices for the Ryan Foundation and those who work inside it. They identify the same criteria we used to identify experts:

judgments of things like experts' conduct, past track record, the coherence of their statements and whether or not they occupy an appropriate social location to qualify as an expert in a given area.

We were conscious of two other criteria implicit in our decision to invite people to join us - whether the expert felt some sympathy for more 'progressive' approaches to public policy without necessarily endorsing such an approach and whether the expert

⁶ Thomas T and Buckmaster L, 'Expertise and public policy: a conceptual guide', Parliamentary Library Research Paper 2013-2014 Social Policy Section, published 21 October 2013. http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1314/PublicPolicy

was likely to be motivated to take the time and effort to provide input into the Foundation.

We were also prepared to trade off capacity to make detailed specialised input against the external standing of the expert - we would value a relatively small input from someone with an international reputation as highly as a more substantial input from someone progressing individual research just beyond the status of graduate student. This reflected our concern to stimulate and influence public debate and especially being taken seriously by policymakers inside public bureaucracies.

Thomas and Buckmaster note that there is an increasing tendency to question authority, including the authority of experts, while at the same time an increasing complexity of social problems. The growing sophistication of analytical techniques has 'led to an exponential increase in the demand for expertise (both on the part of the State and individuals) and, in particular, specialised technical expertise':

The institution of expertise (along with our necessary reliance on experts) poses a number of problems, some of which are particularly thorny. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on the three problems that are arguably of most relevance in public policy terms. The first of these may be described as the political problem of expertise; the second is the problem of identifying who are the relevant experts when it comes to technical decision-making in the public domain and what forms of expertise are available to non-experts; and third, the problem of how non-experts can evaluate expert claims.⁷

There is also the problem of which experts are likely to be believed. Thomas and Buckmaster turn to epistemologist Alvin Goldman, who proposes a number of different types of evidence that a non-expert might consider in order to establish that the word of one expert is more credible than that of their rival. These can be summarised as:

- can I make sense of the arguments?
- which expert seems the more credible?
- who has the numbers on their side?
- are there any relevant interests or biases? and
- what are the experts' track records?'⁸

This provides a checklist which might be applied to the contributions of experts, such as our Foundation's Research Associates. There are many limitations (acknowledged by Goldman), particularly whether lay audiences are well positioned to judge the quality of research records, and thus the professional standing of experts among their peers.

Goldman sees the benefits of what he calls 'communication intermediaries' (meta-experts) that might be used by policymakers to 'level the playing field' in the lay-expert relationship. Thomas and Buckmaster point to other writers such as Drimie, Quinlan and Guston who focus on 'boundary organisations' which seek to cross the

⁷ Thomas and Buckmaster, p 4.

⁸ A. Goldman, 'Experts: which ones should you trust?', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 63 (1), July 001.

boundaries between science, social science, or technology and the political process in order to generate contributions to the policy process.⁹

It is this ambitious role which the Ryan Foundation identified for itself at the outset. We have discovered that there are many barriers to overcome before we can make any policy impact: some of these are within the institutions to which Foundation members belong, and some are external, in the wider policy environment.

Ideology is often hidden away in policy analysis, sometimes identified in the commissioning of policy research activity for symbolic rather than substantive purposes. Sometimes the ideological assumptions condition the use made of particular recommendations – a point vividly illustrated by Peter Murphy discussing the role of statutory authorities in British health services. A key section in one of his articles is entitled ‘The Influence of Neoliberal Ideology and the Creation of Policy-based Evidence as opposed to Pragmatism and the Creation of Evidence-Based Policy’.¹⁰

3. Objectivity and the culture of subordination in universities

‘He who pays the piper calls the tune.’

The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations records that this proverb, which comes from Scottish folklore, did not enjoy common usage until the late nineteenth century, when Browning’s poetry popularised a particular piper from Hamlyn who was paid by the local government authority to deal with vermin. Here we have an epitome of late-Victorian economic rationalism and privatisation of services, perhaps. Whatever its origins, the sentiment can connect our esoteric case study to the wider world of policy expertise and links between universities and practitioners.

The recent ground-breaking survey of attitudes held by Australian public policymakers and academic researchers points to the different rewards systems which currently prevail within universities and public bureaucracies, particularly the time scale and ultimate destination of research output. The researchers suggest that these cultures need to be brought closer together:

The differences in research orientation and priorities between academics and policy makers highlighted by policy makers as a significant barrier to forming and sustaining linkages, however, point to cultural and institutional differences between academics and policy makers that need to be overcome to varying degrees for research processes to operate smoothly and have effective outcomes. By focusing on linkage dynamics such as barriers and facilitators, in addition to an exploration of the importance and role of linkages in research uptake, this research would suggest that linkages are not the simple panacea to such cultural differences that they have long been considered. Rather, this research suggests that a certain degree of ‘common

⁹ Drimie, S and Quinlan T ‘Playing the role of a ‘boundary organisation’: getting smarter with networking’, *Health Research and Policy Systems*, 9(1), 2011, cited by Thomas and Buckmaster, op cit. See also Guston D, ‘Boundary organisations’ in ‘Expertise and Public Policy : A Conceptual Guide.’ http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1314/PublicPolicy

¹⁰ Murphy P, ‘Public health and health and well-being boards: antecedents, theory and development’ in *Perspectives in Public Health*, September 2013, vol 133, no 5.

ground' needs to be put in place to support the establishment and early development of effective linkages.¹¹

We discuss later the question of whether we should condemn or celebrate the absence of common ground; perhaps universities should give comparable rewards to research not receiving government funding, or research not palatable to the current incumbents in government? But perhaps that is the path described by GBS a century ago as the 'bravado of genteel poverty'.¹²

There has been a dramatic, but relatively recent, change in the organisational culture of universities, driven by externally-driven measurement of research outcomes.¹³ Research 'output' measures for both individual and organisational advancement, have grown in importance, alongside a seemingly independent development of the commodification of teaching outputs through levying market-related student fees. Great efforts are now devoted to ensuring all staff, academic as well as administrative-managerial, acquire the skills and attitudes appropriate to delivering on these priorities.

Performance indicators which measured research success appeared often to be cited in dollar amounts. As Barry Jones, a former Minister of Science in the national government, put it recently in his usual blunt style:

Universities have fallen into the hands of accountants and auditors; research has come to be judged by its potential for economic return.¹⁴

Jones goes on:

Education was divided (in ancient Athens) into two categories: pedagogy and philosophy. The pedagogue (paidagogus) was the slave who escorted children to school. ... Pedagogy fits the model where a client (often a state government, dominated by economic pressure) organises training, essentially to meet the needs of society and the economy. Obedience, conformity and controllability are among the desired goals. The outcomes are certain. Philosophy, literally 'love of learning', was intended to encourage understanding of the universe and our role within it, and as a search for meaning. Inevitably its goals are uncertain.¹⁵

¹¹ van der Arend, J, 'Bridging the Research/Policy Gap – Policymaker Perspectives on the Barriers and Facilitators to Effective Links between the Academic and Policy Worlds', PPNC, 2014 .

¹² George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion*, 1912.

¹³ Roger has written elsewhere about a past era, which now seems like a golden age, when the primary role of universities was to combine teaching liberal studies and preparing students for professional practice in a wide range of disciplines. See Scott R, 'Reflective Practice from a "Golden Age": The Progressive Impoverishment of Tertiary Teaching', paper at the 2010 annual conference of the Public Administration Committee of the British Inter-Universities Council, published in *Teaching Public Administration*..(Sage).spring 2012.

¹⁴ Jones B, cited in Sykes, H (ed), "More or Less : Democracy & The New Media", publisher : Future Leaders, Albert Park, Victoria, 2012 p.17.

¹⁵ Jones B, p.18.

The most worrying aspect of this trend is that governments are increasingly placing themselves in a position in which they can influence the direction of research funds, either directly or indirectly, to meet quite specific needs, and to promote particular policies. It would be an even more worrying development if, as a matter of course, university hierarchies at every level were to identify current regimes as their most important clients.

In this setting of competing for scarce resources ultimately controlled by government, the response from administrators at the sharp end of the research-grant acquisition process has been to advise staff and postgraduate students to ensure that they choose projects most likely to succeed in a competitive environment. Projects reflecting the values espoused by the political leadership – about climate change, for example, or urban crime or refugee resettlement - would get an easier passage through the filtering bodies all the way to the Minister's desk.

This has meant explicitly counselling researchers that they should avoid topics for which the outputs might challenge current policy attitudes, such as assuming the reality of anthropogenic climate change, the long-term threat of carbon pollution, or the socially regressive effects of particular tax regimes, incarceration policies, or welfare programs (all of which have been identified as high priority issues by the Board of the Ryan Foundation).

Joining an academic think tank known to have received seed funding from the ALP and the trade union movement could be a poor career move for academics, at least while the LNP is in such a dominant position. A number of people invited to join as Research Associates declined on the basis that this public commitment might result in their access to official records being restricted, thus limiting their capacity to conduct their research, or might reduce their chances of winning competitive grants.

Perhaps these senior academic researchers and postgraduate students were conforming to a widely held norm. It is probably more entrenched in some universities than others, reflecting, in part, the attitudes of current and past university leadership which had shaped the organisational culture. It may also reflect the extent to which these universities measure themselves against levels of funding derived from governments and the private sector as against the longer-term outcomes and wider impact of their research.

It is probable that the diversity of organizational cultures in Brisbane is no different from the rest of Australia. Extended training in the arcane skills of writing research grant proposals is now a prominent feature of many universities. A correspondent for one of the electronic daily newspapers regularly critical of government policy, *Crikey*, reported being told by a biological scientist at a university in a southern state that all his colleagues had a special two-day seminar on writing grant applications:

They told me that they were repeatedly instructed that on no account should they use the expressions 'climate change' or 'global warming' in their applications, because this would lead to instant rejection. However it was possible that reference to 'cataclysmic weather events' might pass muster. God help higher education if the present or any Commonwealth government gets full control of universities.¹⁶

¹⁶ *Crikey* is an electronic newspaper published in Canberra.

Looking further afield, we were attracted by the title that Professor Christian Christensen had given his inaugural lecture at Uppsala last year 'The Public Professor: Dissent in Commodified Higher Education'.

One of the things that I am most worried about in relation to my daughter starting university in 2027 is whether or not the university will come to exist in a form that we recognize today. What I mean by this is: a space within contemporary society not entirely dictated by commercial interests and considerations. It is one of the things that I am grateful for: that, as an employee of a university, at least to some extent, I work within a space where my thinking can be divorced from purely profit-making and commercial considerations. Spaces such as these are increasingly rare.

While we often hear about the virtues of critical thinking in various segments of society, real critical thinking involves the questioning of power, the questioning of authority, the questioning of what we might broadly call 'common sense' ideas. The questioning of these areas is not something that usually goes hand-in-hand with profit-making ventures, or the maintenance of status quo power. The open questioning of authority simply does not lend itself well to closed structures: be they political, corporate or theological. On the contrary, the recognition and acceptance of authority is the cornerstone of these types of structures.

Despite the many problems that we see within academia (from the aforementioned dominance of certain paradigms to restrictive publishing and financing models), the university world is one which should depend upon the questioning of authority: be it authority in the form of theory, intellectual positions, but also the hierarchies of power within society in general.¹⁷

A recent article published in *The Conversation* discussed the problem of academics being accused of political bias – but 'should you nail your political colours to the mast?'.¹⁸ The author, Inger Mewburn, Director of Research Training at the Australian National University, noted that there had been remarkably little research on this topic despite the widely held, conventional view that most academics were leftist, certainly most social scientists. She also observed that the most recent research by Grant Harman dated back to 1975 at a time when a large number of academics had once placed an advertisement in national newspapers condemning the government of the day.

Times have surely changed right? The prospects of academics spending their own money to put ads in the paper criticising the Liberal Party seems unthinkable today. If you're an academic who wants to publicly join a political party, what are the consequences for your career?

Yet it may be that the Ryan Foundation represents a masthead in the local context of Queensland. Those who join as Research Associates are willing to identify with the

¹⁷ Christensen, C, 'The Public Professor: Dissent in Commodified Higher Education Or ... What Kind of University Will My Daughter Attend in 2027?' <http://www.juancole.com/2013/12/professor-commodified-education.html>

¹⁸ <http://theconversation.com/showing-your-colours-the-good-and-bad-of-academics-joining-political-parties-20464>. *The Conversation* is an on-line publication of a consortium of Australian universities.

need for freedom of expression in relation to the sort of research they undertake and the articulation of its findings.

Less than a decade after his 1975 survey, Harman was expressing concern about the erosion of university independence in an international journal. His words from 1983 still have an immediacy for any discussion of research activity in universities:

The key arguments for independence relate to central functions of the university. The tasks of the creation of new knowledge through scholarship and research ... are performed best in environments which are free from direct government or bureaucratic control, or political domination. The highest purposes of the university are more likely to be achieved if staff and students have intellectual freedom of expression and freedom in the choice and conduct of research projects.¹⁹

Academics need to be willing to join that band of policy entrepreneurs, defined by Kingdon as 'people willing to invest their resources in return for policies they favour'. They are likely to respond to several of the motivations identified by Kingdon:

their straightforward concern about certain problems, their pursuit of such self-serving benefits (such as) claiming credit for accomplishment, their promotion of their policy values, and their simple pleasure in participating.²⁰

4. Authoritarian democracies and minority criticism

This raises the question of the relationship between governments and think tanks, institutions which might be expected to be free from the constraints now being imposed on universities. Certainly many contributors to the myriad of think tanks seem to value this independence.

The aim of a recent book by Sykes on new media was:

to examine how digital media influences democratic processes, political institutions and modes of political communication, and in what ways it is impacting on our lives with respect to freedom of expression, civil society, government transparency and the rule of law.²¹

A number of other authors have identified the problem of what Marsh and McLean call 'the hollowing out of democratic engagement' and 'the need for links to be restored between the formal system and its publics'.²² These writers see new media as reconstructing connections which have eroded along with the mass basis of political parties and the decline of conventional mass media. However, these same writers tend not to focus on the attitudes and behaviour of governments themselves, which are increasingly able to manipulate the processes of electoral campaigns and exploit the benefits of mobilising specialist interest groups at the expense of the

¹⁹ Harman G, 'The Erosion of University Independence: Recent Australian Experience', *Higher Education* 12,5, Nov 1983, p.505.

²⁰ John Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*, Little Brown, 1984, cited by Santos, p 7.

²¹ Sykes H (ed) *More or less: democracy & the new media*, Albert Park Victoria, Future Leaders, 2012.

²² Marsh I and McLean S, 'Why the political system needs new media' in Sykes p.76.

wider community. Think tanks need to be able to insert themselves into this political reality, particularly at the 'contemplative' stage in the policy process described by Michael Keating, before assessments of partisan benefit intrude.

This becomes particularly urgent in systems which are threatening to take on the characteristics of authoritarian democracies. This topic is sometimes seen as the preserve of 'development studies', now rampant in universities but it was a rather arcane interest of mine in my academic adolescence. Dipping into this literature again recently, I was struck by its relevance to more modern societies.

Here is a passage from a 2013 review essay by Andras Bozoki:

Thanks to research conducted in the past few years, our understanding has been significantly expanded concerning democracy and authoritarian regimes, as well as the means of both destroying and rebuilding democratic institutions.

The majority of autocratic leaders use the concept of democracy as a screen for building a political regime antithetical to the spirit and practice of a real democracy. Autocrats adopt a number of democratic institutions only to subvert their original purposes. While they pose as democrats, instead of a liberal democracy they initially organize a majoritarian democracy, followed by an illiberal democracy that ignores human rights.... In many cases, well-established democratic institutions do not offer a guarantee against the rise of strongmen when such leaders use the system's weaknesses in bad faith.²³

Bozoki's essay continues with equally germane comments from a best seller called the Dictator's Handbook.²⁴ This imagery might seem extreme, but it is uncomfortably close if applied to the political circumstances in Queensland. Indeed I have drawn on some of this literature in my recent writings about that state.²⁵

Certainly the Ryan Foundation has had to work within constraints on free associations which amount to bullying of the trade union movement, and the sustained attacks on the independence of the judiciary suggest a failure of constraints associated with the conventional separation of the branches of government.

There is a wider problem. This is the marginalisation of large components of society from any engagement with the political process. What is the point of speaking truth to power if no-one is listening?

There have been many observations about the alienation of the bulk of the population from the political process as the political parties turn inward-looking and mainly exist to provide career paths, rather than debate policy options. One young

²³ Bozoki A, 'Dictators and Rebellious Civilians', *Perspectives on Politics*, American Political Science Association, 3, 2013, pp.841-851.

²⁴ Bueno de Mesquita B and Smith A, *The Dictator's Handbook - Why Bad Behaviour is Almost Always Good Politics*, New York, Public Affairs Book, 2011.

²⁵ Scott R, 'Transition to government: lessons from Queensland', PPNC, 2014. <http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/index.php/research-areas/11-political-behaviour-parliament-parties-and-elections/10-transition-to-government-lessons-from-queensland>

Australian writer has described his response to 2013 and its national election campaign as 'the year my politics broke' and he conveys an overwhelming pessimism about the capacity of politicians to deal with real political issues rather than trade in generalised 'statements of the necessary and obvious' during election campaigns and then pursue narrow self-interests when in power.²⁶

It is this pervasive air of pessimism that motivated us to accept the challenge of creating the T J Ryan Foundation, to move the policy debate at least in Queensland beyond 'statements of the necessary and obvious'. We want to add one small voice in support of others similarly engaged in the activities of new media, to reassert the virtue of adding value to the public discourse about appropriate policy options. The new technologies of communication offer a potential challenge for improvement in the vital linkage between thinkers about policy options and those with the capability and capacity for taking action.

In the circumscribed environment of Queensland, the usefulness of the TJRyan Foundation will ultimately be measured by evidence of the extent to which we facilitate exchange between Queensland's ivory towers and the rooms (once 'smoke-filled') where the rising generation of policymakers will sit down to devise future public policies.

²⁶ Green J, *The Year My Politics Broke*, Melbourne University Press, 2013.