

Learnings from the Research in Public Management conference, Carleton University, Ottawa, April 2014.

1. Universities have an important role to play in public accountability;
2. Think-tanks formed from groups of university researchers can contribute to the analysis and formulation of public policy;
3. Policy analysis can be enriched by building on the experience of former public servants.

These are the three ‘take-home messages’ gleaned by Ann Scott and Roger Scott while attending the International Society for Research in Public Management conference, Carleton University, Ottawa, April 2014.

In an analysis of think-tanks Stone wrote:

Think tanks represent 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 undergirded 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.

[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.]

The TJ Ryan Foundation is a public policy think tank established to fill a void that emerged in Queensland following the 2012 election – the absence of academic analysis of policy alternatives from a ‘progressive’ viewpoint. After the change of government the advice of public servants whose expertise had previously been the mainstay of Queensland public policy was no longer accessible the ALP. Since its election, the LNP government has been subjected to scant serious scrutiny despite its many radical policy changes, a problem exacerbated by the government’s attempts to minimise public debate.

Those of us who have become engaged in the TJ Ryan Foundation believe that universities in general and the academics within them have an obligation to engage in building collaborative relationships with policymakers.

Professor Christian Christensen recently drew attention to this obligation in his inaugural lecture in Uppsala entitled: ‘The Public Professor: Dissent in Commodified Higher Education’.

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.

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.

[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>]

A recent article in *The Conversation* discussed the problem of academics being accused of political bias – ‘should you nail your political colours to the mast?’. The author 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). The most recent research was undertaken by Grant Harman in 1975, at a time when a large number of academics had placed an advertisement in national newspapers condemning the government of the day. Mewburn commented:

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?

[<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.]

Perhaps the TJ Ryan Foundation represents a masthead in Queensland. Those who join as Research Associates are willing to identify with the need for freedom of expression in relation to the sort of research they undertake and the articulation of its findings. But we are also

garnering the expertise of contributors who bring years of experience in the public service, so that this rich resource is not wasted. The linkages between academics and public policy practitioners takes place within the Foundation itself (indeed some fall into the recently-coined category of ‘pracademics’ having experience of both worlds), as well as between the Foundation and ‘progressive’ policymakers.

Less than a decade after his 1975 survey, Harman wrote about the erosion of university independence. His words from 1983 are still pertinent in any discussion of university research:

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.[Harman G, ‘The Erosion of University Independence: Recent Australian Experience’, *Higher Education* 12,5, Nov 1983, p.505.]

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

This online dimension has changed the way in which think tanks can contribute to public debate. Sykes has written on the role of new media in the democratic process, 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’.[Sykes H (ed) *More or less: democracy & the new media*, Albert Park Victoria, Future Leaders, 2012.]

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’. [Marsh I and McLean S, ‘Why the political system needs new media’ in Sykes p.76.] They 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, they do not discuss 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 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 adopting the characteristics of authoritarian democracies. Bozoki analysed authoritarian regimes in developing countries, but his conclusions seem as appropriate to Queensland in 2014. [Bozoki A, ‘Dictators and Rebellious Civilians’, *Perspectives on Politics*, American Political Science Association, issue 03, 2013, pp.841-851.(on-line)]

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.

The Ryan Foundation has already had to work within constraints imposed by the government which have amounted to bullying of the trade union movement (one source of extra-parliamentary opposition), and the sustained attacks on the independence of the judiciary threaten the constraints of the conventional separation of powers.

There is also a wider problem. This is the marginalisation of large sections of the community from any engagement with the political process. What is the point of speaking truth to power if no-one is listening? One young Australian writer has described his response to the national election campaign in 2013 as 'the year my politics broke' and his 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. [Green J, *The Year My Politics Broke*, Melbourne University Press, 2013.]

It is this pervasive air of pessimism that motivated us to accept the challenge of creating the TJ Ryan Foundation, to move the policy debate, at least in Queensland, beyond 'statements of the necessary and obvious', and to provide a Queensland-focussed forum for the discussion of public policy issues.

In the circumscribed environment of Queensland, the usefulness of the TJ Ryan 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.

(This is an edited excerpt from a paper by Ann Scott and Roger Scott at the International Society for Research in Public Management conference, Carleton University, Ottawa, April 2014)