

Thinking Outside the Tank?

DISCUSSION PAPER

To make public policy, governments often look to outside expertise for help: civil society, academics, consultants and think tanks. The recent closure of three Ontario think tanks – Mowat Centre, Institute for Competitiveness and Prosperity, and Martin Prosperity Institute – marks an opportunity to take stock of the status of expertise in the public policy ecosystem, both in Ontario and across Canada.

The purpose of this brief is to spark a discussion on the sources of public policy ideas outside of government, using think tanks as a starting point. What do think tanks currently do well, and where are there gaps? What needs to change and what other models are there for doing policy thinking outside of government?

Join the discussion

We want to hear from the people who use or contribute to public policy ideas from outside of government, from a range of sectors and perspectives – civil servants, political advisors, advocates, journalists, academics, and engaged residents. If you have comments about this discussion paper or responses to the questions at the end of the document, or if you want to learn more, please reach us at outsidethetank@springboardpolicy.com.

We will capture what we learn in this process in a report to be published fall 2019.

What are think tanks for?

There's no single definition of a public policy think tank, but this brief uses the term to refer to non-partisan organizations with a mandate to develop public policy expertise – research, analysis, evidence – and share it publicly.

Different think tanks focus on different policy areas and types of work, but they generally play some combination of these roles:

ROLE	DESCRIPTION
Generating policy ideas	Governments, opposition, and civil society need credible policy solutions to problems. Think tanks mostly set their own agendas, rather than giving their best advice on questions asked by the government of the day. Having an external source of ideas is especially important for those engaging with public policy from outside of government without the benefit of the public service's work.
Thinking long-term on public policy	News coverage of public policies follows quick cycles, and politicians are not often rewarded for taking positions that trade short-term costs for long-term gains, or that only yield benefits over a long time frame. Outside voices like think tanks don't have to operate on the same political timelines and can help get both slower-burning issues and those that are painful in the short term onto the policy agenda by showing that they matter. ¹
Advancing ambitious and innovative ideas and methods	Think tanks are able to propose and explore more radical, high risk or expensive policy ideas than sitting governments, because they're unconstrained by issues like electability. In this way they can be testing grounds for normalizing innovative ideas and creating a mandate for governments to act. They can also be spaces to collaborate with industry and civil society.
Translating knowledge	Think tanks can create bridges between each of academic/technical experts, governments, and the public. Policymakers don't generally have the time to keep up with academic research, meaning think tanks often play a role in synthesizing evidence. ² Think tank experts can also offer journalists context and information on public policy.
Contributing to democratic oversight	Ordinary citizens need help parsing and tracking the details of government policies and their efficacy. Think tanks can play an important role in democratic accountability by doing this work.
Creating space for discussion	Public policy improves when people with different perspectives and roles have a chance to hear from each other on neutral ground, either behind closed doors in roundtables, or in public through moderated discussions. Think tanks can be convenors.
Developing public policy talent	Civil service, political staff, and elected officials have few places to improve their skills outside of government or advocacy roles. Think tanks can be places for policy professionals to learn new skills and deepen others.

1 Bert Fraussen and Darren Halpin, "Think Tanks and Strategic Policymaking," October 30, 2018, <https://onthinktanks.org/articles/think-tanks-and-strategic-policymaking/>.

2 Rohinton Medhora "Wonk Friendly," *Literary Review of Canada*, accessed July 9, 2019, <https://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2017/01/wonk-friendly/>.

Gaps and challenges

Canada's think tank ecosystem faces gaps and challenges in filling these critical roles. There are both structural and operational problems that need to be addressed if think tanks are to be part of a thriving ecosystem of public policy expertise outside of government.



FUNDING MODELS

Think tanks need sustainable and adequate funding to do their work. Endowments are rare in Canada and government funding can be unstable, especially across changes of government.³ Government funding also brings the potential for conflict of interest (real or perceived) when analyzing government policies. Other revenue sources, such as service contracts or donor-sponsored work also risk skewing priorities and recommendations – for example by emphasizing “hot issues” rather than planning a long-term research agenda, or by avoiding topics or conclusions that do not serve the funder’s priorities.⁴



CONNECTING WITH CITIZENS

Think tanks typically generate their ideas through opaque and elite-driven processes, without much citizen involvement. The Chatham House Rule and closed-door conversations are valuable, but are in tension with open policy making. In an era of rising populist mistrust of expertise, think tanks risk not only missing insights from the public, but also alienating or becoming irrelevant to the public.⁵



PRODUCT & SERVICE INNOVATION

With some exceptions, most think tanks are producing the same kind of work they did 30 years ago: lengthy reports with executive summaries, conferences, and roundtable discussions. These are all fairly static products and processes, that create a fixed output that is not well-suited to busy policymakers’ attention. There is room for “thinking outside the PDF” in how policy research, advice, and analysis is delivered to make it more responsive, iterative, interactive, and dynamically communicated.

3 Mark Cardwell, “Think Tanks Fill an Important Niche within Canada’s Public Policy Landscape,” *University Affairs*, April 10, 2019, <https://www.universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/think-tanks-fill-an-important-niche-within-canadas-public-policy-landscape/>.

4 Annapoorna Ravichander and Bhaswati Mukhopadhyay, “Canadian Think Tanks Are on an Innovative Golden Goose Chase,” August 30, 2018, <https://onthinktanks.org/articles/canada-think-tanks-are-on-an-innovative-golden-goose-chase/>.

5 Anne-Marie Slaughter and Ben Scott, “Rethinking the Think Tank,” *Washington Monthly*, November 8, 2015, <https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/novdec-2015/rethinking-the-think-tank/>.



TALENT

Many early-to-mid career roles at think tanks are poorly paid and insecure compared to government and private sector work. Senior think tank staff are more visible and better compensated, but rarely come to their positions by rising through the ranks of think tanks themselves. These are not the conditions to create a healthy pipeline of professionals in the sector.⁶ There is a missed opportunity for think tanks to play a key role in public policy talent development.



DIVERSITY

Staff at think tanks tend to be much less diverse than the people of Canada, in terms of racial/ethnic/Indigenous identity and socio-economic background. Think tank work also tends to be concentrated in Toronto and Ottawa. This can limit the ability of think tanks to identify problems and propose solutions that reflect the perspectives of Canadians in different circumstances.



MEETING GOVERNMENT NEEDS

Canada's think tanks provide high level recommendations to governments, both directly and indirectly. They are not traditionally well-equipped to provide next step thinking about how to put their recommendations into practice. For this, governments often turn to management consultants, which can result in duplicated work and expense. Some think tanks in other jurisdictions – for instance the UK's Nesta – both generate ideas and work with governments to design and test implementation.

⁶ Taylor Own and Robert Muggah, "Better Think Tanks, Better Foreign Policy," OpenCanada, October 16, 2013, <https://www.opencanada.org/features/better-think-tanks-better-foreign-policy/>.

Alternatives to the think tank

A strong public policy ecosystem can include a range of other players that have similar roles to think tanks. These other players present potential opportunities to strengthen and broaden the ecosystem. Each has different strengths and drawbacks.

Policy journalism

Despite serious pressures on the journalism sector, recent years have seen a new wave of public policy-focused journalism, especially in the US (e.g. Vox, NYT's The Upshot, ProPublica) as well as a wave of think tanks embracing journalism-like work (the Brookings Institution, the Centre for American Progress), blurring the lines between the two.

Policy-engaged academics and independent analysts

Experts with an interest in participating in policy conversations no longer need to rely on affiliations with institutions to publish and distribute their work – a Squarespace website, Medium post, or even Twitter thread can easily reach farther and get more readership than many think tank reports. The growth of public policy schools provide more professional spaces for public policy academics and independent analysts to emerge.

Time-limited and lean think tanks

Rather than permanent organizations, there is some precedent for time-limited think tank projects with focused mandates. For example, Canada's Ecofiscal Commission was deliberately set up to have a five-year mandate. These initiatives can often operate virtually, borrowing supporting resources from funders and partners.

Embedded think tanks

Some organizations, including management consulting firms, banks, and industry associations, are embracing the trend toward using thought leadership as a part of brand building and have created internal think tanks or think tank functions.

Cross-sector coalitions

When individual stakeholders don't have the bandwidth or resources to do deep policy research or analysis, they can pool resources. Examples include the National Housing Collaborative and the Task Force on Modernizing Income Security for Working Age Adults.

Evidence institutions

A range of organizations in the public and non-profit sector have mandates to measure performance and generate evidence about the effects of public policies. While Canada does not have a "What Works Centre" recent investments like the Future Skills Centre are contributing to an increased body of independent policy-relevant research and measurement.

Key questions

- ▶ *What kinds of information and analysis do governments want from external policy expertise? Are they currently getting it?*
- ▶ *What does the public need from the external public policy ecosystem? What do different parts of civil society need? How do they use public policy research and analysis?*
- ▶ *How closely aligned, or separate, should sources of policy expertise be with causes and advocacy campaigns?*
- ▶ *Why is Canada's think tank sector leaner than those in other countries? What would create a stronger ecosystem?*
- ▶ *What non-think tank sources of public policy expertise are most promising and for what purposes? How should they be supported?*
- ▶ *What are the barriers to getting good public policy expertise outside of government? What are the most promising solutions?*
- ▶ *What ideas and perspectives are missing from the current public policy ecosystem?*
- ▶ *Are there important issues that this discussion paper has missed? What are they?*

Join the discussion

If you have answers to these questions or comments on this discussion paper, please reach us at outsidethetank@springboardpolicy.com.

We will capture what we learn in this process in a report to be published fall 2019.

The background features a collage of various textures and patterns, including wood grain, marbled paper, and geometric shapes. A solid blue overlay covers the entire image, with white text and lines. The word 'springboard' is written in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font. The 'spring' part is underlined by a horizontal line that extends to the left, and the 'board' part is underlined by a horizontal line that extends to the right.

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