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Extension

UK think tanks

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This piece can be used alongside Richard Kelly's article, 'From Blue Labour to Red Tories: party factions in Britain today', on p. 24 of this issue of the magazine. Here, Paul Jeater looks at some of the most influential UK think tanks, and examines the relationship that they enjoy with parties.

In early 2013, the *Evening Standard* in London reported on its front page that some Londoners, after they've met housing costs, have to put aside 51% of disposable income for childcare costs. The information came from a report from the Resolution Foundation. On page 2 of the same newspaper, there was a report saying that 10 million pensioners should lose their winter fuel payments, so that the billions saved could be redirected to tackle what was described as the 'old age care crisis'. This report came from the Centre Forum.

What are think tanks?

The Resolution Foundation and the Centre Forum are just two examples of the ever-growing number of what the media and political scientists call 'think tanks'. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a 'think tank' is a term used to describe 'a research institute or other organisation providing advice and ideas on national or commercial problems'.

Party connections

Some think tanks are directly linked to, or associated with, a particular political party while others seek to influence parties across the political spectrum. Where a think tanks attempts to influence all political parties, there is clearly a very blurred line between think tanks and cause pressure groups. A useful example here is the Electoral Reform Society, founded in the nineteenth century. It campaigns in support of electoral reform and attempts to influence all political parties, as well as the general public. Arguably, it could be classified as a think tank and a pressure group.

Some think tanks are closely associated with individual political parties. The Centre for Policy Studies, founded in 1974, is a right of centre organisation that undertakes research and promotes policies that aim to reduce the role of the state and reduce the size of the public sector. Although claiming to be non-partisan, its promotion of neo-liberalism has led to it having extremely close ties with the Conservative Party.

Perhaps the oldest think tank operating in UK politics today is the Fabian Society. It was founded in 1884, before the creation of the Labour Party. Its aim has been to promote the evolutionary path to socialism, persuading people through the weight of its argument. As a society it invites membership and is indeed affiliated to the Labour Party.

It isn't just the two largest parties that are influenced by think tanks — the Liberal Democrats have close links with the Centre Forum, and over the last 2 years Greenhouse, a think tank with close

associations with the Green Party, has produced an influential paper on our responsibilities to future generations.

While some think tanks focus purely on influencing the policy of one political party, others have cast their net wider. In 2011 Compass, a think tank initially associated with the Labour Party, opened its doors to members of other parties who wished to create a 'progressive majority' and 'good society' in Britain.

What's in a name?

The number of think tanks can be bewildering and they often seem to have incredibly similar names but organisations with similar names can promote radically different ideas. While the Institute of Economic Affairs promotes free market economic policies, the New Economic Foundation promotes a more radical economic agenda promoting policies including a shorter working week.

Many think tanks benefit from having charitable status — some are funded by private donations, while many rely heavily on membership subscriptions. Some have chosen single word names such as Demos, Civitas and Theos — their aims only become apparent after research and reading. Meanwhile others promote single issues, such as 'Population Matters', which focuses on the impact of population growth and its impact on the quality of life across the planet. Among its patrons is Sir David Attenborough. This reveals another feature — in order to acquire media coverage for their reports and research, many think tanks look to high-profile spokespersons.

When it comes to think tanks, names should not be taken at face value — the Global Warming Policy Foundation at first glance might be thought to be an organisation campaigning against climate change. In reality, it is exactly the opposite — it is an organisation of climate change deniers that has Lord Lawson, former chancellor of the exchequer, as one of its main spokesmen. When studying think tanks, it pays to undertake research before jumping to conclusions.

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