

TANKED: CANADIAN THINK TANKS AND THE DAILY PRESS

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for the Sheldon Chumir Foundation for Ethics in Leadership, June 2007¹

Uncritical ears

In an uncharacteristic move one day in March 2007, the *National Post* (and some other Canwest newspapers) ran a news story based on a report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, a progressive think tank it described as “an independent research institute based in Toronto.” The report was an unsurprising one that deplored the growing disparity in incomes between haves and have-nots. It was, however, given good display, taking up 16 column inches atop one of the news pages in section A of the *Post*. That same morning, John Ibbitson dealt with the issue in his *Globe and Mail* column. “Most think tanks in Canada are a waste of time,” he wrote. “Those on the right twist and distort data to prove the country is overtaxed and underproducing. Those on the left use the same data to prove that society is increasingly unequal and unjust.” Put another way, think tanks are perfect illustrations of what Jane Jacobs, in her book *Systems of Survival*, called our present society’s two ethical systems: the commercial moral syndrome and the guardian moral syndrome.

The real question, I believe, is whether Canadian newspapers are outsourcing the news when they run material from ideologically driven think tanks that pop up at an alarming rate. Are the papers not, in this era of deteriorating circulation and declining budgets, backing away from a part of their responsibility? Where think tanks are concerned, are newspapers in danger of becoming printed blogs or mere public bulletin boards, giving space to anyone who sounds sane and is not committing libel? At the very least, are they not grinding other people’s axes along with their own?

To be sure, much is thought, taught and written about the increased corporate concentration of Canada’s news media, but too little attention is given to the corresponding concentration of news itself. One important part of the latter process comes from the proliferation of what often are merely well-dressed disinformation factories seeking to promote specific political, economic or social goals by generating quasi-news—reports, studies, research papers, conference proceedings and the like—which the media’s leadership stratum feels obliged to report as hard news or at least as useful comment that falls just short of direct propaganda. Such groups capitalise on the media’s appetite for editorial content that comes free of charge. They also exploit the tendency of Canada’s generally conservative press to trust non-governmental institutions more than governments themselves. Such cells are usually called *think tanks*, a term whose utility is its sheer amorphousness and nebulosity—and the suggestion, to uncritical ears, of academic respectability and dedication to the principle of free inquiry.

¹ The opinions expressed in material published by the Sheldon Chumir Foundation for Ethics in Leadership are those of the author or authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

In 2004, a national poll, the first of its kind, undertaken jointly by the journalism programmes of four universities, found that 76 per cent of respondents believed that the Canadian media do not, in the words of the *Vancouver Sun*, “provide impartial facts but are often influenced by powerful people...” Think tanks are one of the mechanisms of this lack of impartiality, although the people who run them don’t always see it that way. Michael Walker, the co-founder and long-time executive director of the Fraser Institute, once asked in the *Literary Review of Canada*: “How does anybody—a consumer, a taxpayer, a prime minister—get unbiased, value-free information that has not been spin-doctored by an interest group seeking to influence their opinion?” For his part, Robert Fulford, the conservative columnist who also serves a valuable role as the Canadian media’s village scold, sees such outsourcing as a potential problem, but one best viewed in the context of general media laxity involving unattributed quotation of news sources and other more-talked-about issues. He adds that think tanks, despite whatever possible dangers might be read into their becoming what he calls “social agents”, still do more good than harm as their influence widens.

Essentially, all news breaks down into two categories. Events that happen, take place or otherwise come into existence in ways not always predictable constitute hard news. Being so often a matter of caprice and accident, hard news is not so easily manipulated in pursuit of particular agendas. Hard news can be spun but not spurned, contextualised but not ignored. Another sort of news, a variety of soft news or commentary, includes what is created deliberately in the assembly-line environments of the think tanks, which in their search for legitimacy and headlines try to disguise soft news as hard. Think tanks of the sort we now associate with the phrase became conspicuous following the invention of the op-ed page in the mid-twentieth century, once lengthy letters and commentaries by non-professionals, the sort usually intended to inform rather than to endorse or condemn, ceased being a staple of newspapers as daily journalism became a branch of large corporate enterprise.

The fact that so many think tanks use the word *institute* in their names also feeds such misconceptions. No think tank calls itself a lobbying group: a special kind of lobbying group aimed not at influencing legislation directly, but rather at altering public opinion so that politicians can claim their legislation arises naturally, organically, in response to significant public insistence. In the words of William Watson, the conservative economist and newspaper columnist, think tanks hope to discredit the points of view they oppose by a process of constant erosion. “The role of think tanks is usually a slow drip,” he has said, “but given time, the rock does give way.”

Writing in the *National Post*, the conservative historian Michael Bliss has called Canada’s network of think tanks “a phenomenon [that] has not been well studied.” The situation is curious, he went on, given that “for some years Parliament, the universities and the national civil service have been increasingly upstaged as centres of political discussion by organizations such as the C.D. Howe Institute, the Conference Board of Canada, the Institute for Research on Public Policy, [and] the Donner Foundation,” among others.

The list easily could be made far longer. The range of opinion, however, would be broadened only slightly by inclusion of more moderate organisations such as the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and the Parkland Institute, groups that have comparatively little influence because they are relative underdogs with relatively little funding, dependent on governments and unions. Nearly all think tanks are, in contrast to these two examples, rightwing in orientation. They are financed, with limited oversight and transparency, by contributions from the corporate sector, as well as from individual conservatives of one stripe or another (the Fraser Institute has 3,000 members). These corporations and individuals in turn derive tax benefits from their support when the recipient organisations are registered charities, which the major think tanks tend to be. Specifically, they are classed as educational charities and by statute can spend no more than ten per cent of their budget on what might be termed lobbying. Receiving charitable status is a long process and not every group that obtains it is able to retain it. Those that have lost the privilege include Greenpeace (a celebrated case), as well as pro-life organisations.

Beyond the question of their status as charities, these “institutes”, “foundations”, “non-profit research organisations” and (the most candid term in use) “interest groups” are not regulated or even self-regulated, there being no national umbrella organisation. The situation is similar in the United States, except that think tanks there are more daring in their attempts to hijack the nation’s policy agenda. In the American system, however, the most blatant players are usually set up more candidly, as such ventures as political action committees or 527 committees (so named after the tax code provision that allowed for their creation). In neither country is there a comprehensive directory of think tanks. Several commentators, however, have compiled lists of those they consider the most important, and a few Canadian examples are included in the annual international directory of think tanks published in Japan by the National Institute for Advanced Research (known in English by the acronym NIRA, a think tank that, like the Fraser, the C.D. Howe and other Canadian examples, often works collaboratively with sister think tanks in other countries).

Of course, maintaining an up-to-date database of Canadian think tanks would be difficult, given not only the looseness of the term, but also the fact that anybody can begin one. For example, Frank Stronach, the mercurial auto parts billionaire, set up one called the Fair Enterprise Institute. He told a *Toronto Star* reporter at the time that the institute would be similar to the Fraser or the Howe except that “we’ll have better ideas”, even though its budget would be only \$1 million a year. In another instance, an aspirant to the leadership of the Parti Québécois, Pauline Marois, ignited controversy by establishing a think tank called Groupe Réflexion Québec, causing the party leader to question whether it was a stalking horse for its founder’s political ambitions. She replied, according to the *Montreal Gazette*, that in no way was “her think tank [...] a front for a bid for the party leadership [but rather was like the] many other discussion groups of a similar nature, which are contributing to the debate of ideas within the party. She added that it’s necessary to collect donations to pay for organizing meetings of her group.” No charitable status, no corporate bankrollers. In the run-up to the leadership convention of

the federal Liberal Party in 2006, Peter C. Newman called Michael Ignatieff's inner circle a "retinue of two dozen advisors—really a private think tank—which secretly plotted his strategy, from day to day and debate to debate."

Where think tanks come from

There is some disagreement about the origin of the concept of the think tank as an extra-governmental generator of research used in policy-making. NIRA believes that the earliest example was the one now called the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies. It was founded in London by the Duke of Wellington in 1831. It promotes increased military spending, a security-conscious society and general bellicosity. Looking at the other end of the political spectrum in Britain, some people are comfortable calling the Fabian Society, the socialist organisation founded in 1884 to push for orderly social change, a think tank.

The first US think tank, many believe, arose from the creation of Liberia by an odd alliance of northern abolitionists and southern slave-owners wishing to establish a homeland for freed slaves, the first of whom were resettled there in 1822 on land granted to the American Colonization Company by local tribal leaders. British and French abolitionists and politicians favoured turning the colony into an independent state, and the transition came about in 1847. Needing a constitution, the Liberians and their supporters turned to the law faculty of Harvard College, who in response formed themselves into an extramural group for this specific purpose. Inevitably, then, Liberia ended up with a republican form of government, with a president and a bicameral congress.

The story is an interesting illustration of the use of think tanks to lend artificial legitimacy to a policy that already has been mandated: the think tank whose rubber stamp masquerades as research independence. But it also is a way of approaching the question of the changing nature of think tanks, a question that, like so many others in politics and philosophy, is intricately bound up with language.

In brief, think tanks came into existence long before the term now used to describe them. Two important centrist or centre-right American think tanks, the Brookings Institution and the Hoover Institution, began in 1916 and 1918 respectively. (The words *institution* and *institute* are more common to those created before the Second World War, as well as to far more recent ones wishing to sound scholarly and authoritative.)

During negotiations surrounding the Treaty of Versailles at the end of the First World War, President Woodrow Wilson brought together a group of distinguished academics under the chilling name The Inquiry. During the Depression, Franklin Roosevelt raised a similar group called the Brains Trust (or sometimes, Brain Trust), drawing heavily on Columbia University and Harvard. The terms caught on in the news media and in the popular culture more generally, and spread to Britain. During the

Second World War, *The Brains Trust* was one of the most popular programmes on the BBC. It featured a diverse interdisciplinary panel of specialists and generalists—C.E.M. Joad, Kenneth Clark, Julian Huxley and Barbara Ward were members at various times—fielding questions from listeners. Its success further popularised the concept of a group of smart outsiders brought together as a problem-solving collective, the intellectual equivalent of a pick-up hockey team. One extension of this in American corporate life was the *skunk works* (the term coined by the cartoonist Al Capp in his comic strip *L'il Abner*): a research-and-development team physically separate from the rest of the company, so as to stimulate creativity as well as promote secrecy.

The idea of disparate intellectuals, who could be retained as a group to provide fresh perspectives on some pressing matter of public policy, exists mostly in people's idealising memory. (Hardly any confessed think tanks in Canada state on their websites that they are for hire this way, as independent advisors. One that does so is the Asia Pacific Foundation, which is funded by Foreign Affairs and International Trade, the Canadian International Development Agency and other governmental and quasi-governmental bodies.) Strangely, the idea of the freelance think-tank intellectual was for years most commonly used in connection with the RAND Corporation, which was founded in 1945 and was among the first associated with the term *think tank*, originally a piece of Second World War military slang for the secure rooms in which strategy was discussed. The Pentagon would retain RAND, which was funded by defence contractors, to offer “advice” about the development and purchase of new weapons systems.

No think tank identifies itself as a think tank in its name, but neither does any deny the label when it is applied. For think tanks, the utility of the term is that it is open to such varying interpretations. The range is illustrated in pop culture at its most pop. The title character of the American television series *MacGyver* (1985–92) was a former Special Forces soldier turned a kind of secret agent employed by a “think tank” called the Phoenix Foundation to combat anti-Americanism (defined in the show by the abstractions *crime* and *evil*). Conversely, the science fiction series *Stargate SG-1* (1997–2002) featured a diverse band of heroes with special skills coming together to fight intergalactic evil that was occasionally identified as a “think tank”. Similarly, a mysterious and hazily defined think tank, but a benevolent one all the same, figured in *Star Trek: Voyager*. No doubt many laypeople became aware of think tanks only through Richard Nixon. In 1971, he ordered his assistants to burgle the Brookings Institution, believing that documents disparaging of America's conduct of the Vietnam War were secreted there. As one of the infamous Nixon tapes later revealed, he said, “Break into the place, rifle the files and bring them out.”

In the United States particularly, the term continues to invite debasement of various kinds. One recent self-help book published there is entitled *The Little Think Tank for Managing Your Life: Powerful Inspiration and Tips for Each and Every Day of the Year*. President George W. Bush's plans for a presidential library at a cost of \$500 million include provision for a “think tank.” The point is simply that the term *think tank* continues to worm its way into the popular consciousness in various ways. Both Yahoo

and IBM have “think tanks”, so called, to advise customers on how to use even more Yahoo services and IBM products.

Surveying the ground

Think tanks, and the implications of them as an extra-democratic phenomenon, have been rigorously investigated in the United States in recent years. The results are to be found in some of the books listed in the bibliography at the end of this report. Canadian think tanks, except in specific comparison to American ones, have had much less attention paid to them, perhaps in part for cultural reasons. Even with the rise of neo-conservatism, politics in Canada are simply less polarised than those in the United States. Also, Canada is much more comfortable than the US is with private/public partnerships, which numerous think tanks either in fact are or at least attempt to present themselves as being.

Most of the serious research on Canadian think tanks that has been undertaken is the work of Donald E. Abelson, a University of Western Ontario political scientist. Of particular interest among his numerous publications in this field is his groundbreaking book *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutions*. Before answering the question in his title, he surveys the ground rather thoroughly. In doing so, he at once distinguishes between two sets of experiences. The first is the American idea of think tanks as government contractors working on longer-range projects in defence and foreign policy than government itself was usually able to undertake efficiently. The other is the Canadian pattern, in which, by comparison, think tanks have greater influence in economic affairs. He cites the Canadian Tax Foundation, founded in 1946, and the Conference Board of Canada, founded in 1954, as a kind of branch plant of the Conference Board in New York. The Conference Board of Canada, headquartered in Ottawa, is the country’s largest such institution, with 200 staff and an annual budget of \$34 million, up from \$20 million only five years ago. He also mentions other so-called think tanks of the 1950s and 1960s, such as the Vanier Institute of the Family, and the Parliamentary Centre for Foreign Affairs. The latter was established by the government to undertake detailed research on behalf of departments and committees. It was *of* Parliament without being *in* Parliament: a classic skunk works. The Pearson and Trudeau governments went so far as to create specialised institutes on this model to generate needed advice: the Economic Council of Canada, the Science Council of Canada, the National Council of Welfare and the Law Reform Commission of Canada. These were effectively eliminated by the Mulroney government. The Chrétien government, however, reclaimed the principle by setting up the Policy Research Initiative through the Privy Council Office.

In Canada, just as in the US, the great boom in think tanks came in the 1970s and 1980s and was in some measure perhaps an attempt to circumvent the ponderous bureaucracy that these governments had inherited and then overfed. A cynic might say the politicians created a rival bureaucracy in the private sector to serve them. This was the era of what Abelson calls the “advocacy think tank”. He writes: “What distinguished

advocacy think tanks from the earlier types [...] was not their desire to study public policy issues but their profound determination to market their ideas to various target audiences. Rather than reflecting on important policy issues from the comfort of their book-lined offices, [they] understood the importance of immersing themselves in the political arena.” Most often they were in the business of business. They used corporate donations (the sort no longer permitted to fund federal political campaigns) to influence the public via the mass media. Their goals were those of the new conservatism. In Canada, this meant corporate and personal tax breaks, private health care, an elected Senate, closer ties with the United States and, more recently, increased military spending.

Examples of far-right to centre-right think tanks dating from this era would include the Canada West Foundation, the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, the Mackenzie Institute and of course the Fraser Institute, perhaps the one that has been most successful in using the media for its own purposes. It is thus in contrast to think tanks that project a benign and well-considered face on their activities without obscuring their agendas. For example, one of the oldest and best known think tanks, the C.D. Howe, avoids seeming to be anything other than a body of sober cogitators working selflessly in the interests of all Canadians. Using the name of Howe, the arch interventionist who was Mackenzie King’s famed Minister of Everything, certainly helps. The Fraser prefers a more in-your-face approach. I will use the Fraser Institute as a case study a bit later.

Some new think tanks appeared in the 1990s as well. Two of them were initiatives of persons previously associated with the federal research institutes established by Liberals and dismantled by the Mulroney Conservatives in 1992. That very year, a former executive director of the National Council on Welfare was instrumental in establishing the Caledon Institute of Social Policy with funding from the leftist Maytree Foundation, a Toronto organisation that is involved with immigration, refugee and urbanisation issues. Two years later, the former director of the Economic Foundation of Canada set up Canadian Policy Research Networks Inc. Its mission, in Abelson’s words, is “to sponsor longer-term, interdisciplinary policy-research programmes on social and economic policy issues...” In doing so, it orchestrates and collates the findings of other think tanks. Until the 1990s, think tanks promoting the interests of their particular regions, such as Calgary’s Canada West Foundation, were synonymous with western alienation. In 1994, however, the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies opened in Halifax. Although ambitious, it is among the smaller think tanks in terms of staffing and budget.

Other think tanks that recur frequently in discussions of the subject include the following.

The Canadian Institute of International Affairs is located physically at York University in Toronto, though its birth predates York’s by three decades. It was founded in 1928, a late expression of the desire for clarity in the reconfigured world that came about as a result of the Great War. Through the years, it has carefully enlisted or made connections with both Liberal and Conservative figures, with the latter dominating. Sir Robert Borden, the former prime minister, was the Institute’s first president. He, and they, might be said to have originated the idea of think tanks as resting places for retired

but prestige-rich politicians (and sometimes journalists as well). The tradition at the Institute stretches for more than 70 years, to Barbara McDougall, former external affairs minister in the Mulroney government.

The Conference Board of Canada, mentioned earlier, focuses on economic forecasting and steers clear of partisan politics in its support of big business. Partly as a result no doubt, it is one of the think tanks quoted and cited most frequently in the media, showing that a tone of sober disinterest can be as effective as the Fraser's aggressiveness in taking a message to market. Its chief executive is Anne Golden, a well known figure in the politics of Toronto and Ontario.

The Institute for Research on Public Policy occupies a position in the centre-right, in contrast to the Fraser Institute, for example. Hugh Segal, formerly Brian Mulroney's chief of staff, was its director before being appointed to the Senate. It has drawn board members from the centre-left as well as the centre-right. Taking the same approach, it has benefited from grants from various governments, both federal and provincial. It is among the richest think tanks, with an endowment put at about \$34 million in 2004. It is concerned with the usual economic and foreign policy issues, but has extended its reach by taking on immigration, refugee policy and health: matters that are as much social issues as political ones. Others took a similar tack; the Canada West Foundation, for example, began pronouncing on aboriginal policy, urban issues and energy, and the C.D. Howe in 2006 announced a broadening of interests that would see it examine such issues as telecommunications and the electricity market. In most timely fashion, it also stepped up its work on global warming. Generally speaking, however, Canadian think tanks were slow to turn their attention to environmental issues until just recently.

Conversely, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives is one of the poorest think tanks to have a national presence and a considerable reputation, but then it is a leftwing one. It studies poverty and labour issues, as well as the usual mixture of monetary policy and other purely economic topics. Individuals associated with it include the feminist Judy Rebick and leaders of organised labour. Although the least fiscally robust of the major think tanks, it leads in the number of paid memberships (about 10,000), which account for more than half of its revenues. Funds are supplemented by government grants and by paid research for outside groups and organisations on a contract basis.

There are perhaps a hundred Canadian think tanks, using the term in a spirit of inclusiveness, but no one knows for certain. What is clear is that the number keeps growing.

It would be remiss to ignore Canadians' little-known contributions to think tanks in other countries. Some have contributed money. Conrad Black, according to one of his biographers, Tom Bower, gave \$375,000 a year to the Institute of Strategic Studies, a London think tank. Others gave their know-how: Canadians such as Peter MacLeod were involved in Demos, the most prominent of the new British think tanks of the 1990s that provided much of the theoretical and intellectual force behind Tony Blair and New

Labour. Robert Skinner, formerly the deputy minister of energy in Ottawa, went on to Chatham House, the foremost British think tank on international affairs. Another Canadian, Norine MacDonald, is the president of the Senlis Council, another think tank based in London, but with offices in Ottawa, Paris, Brussels—and Kabul. At this writing, MacDonald actually resides in Afghanistan, the subject of a major Senlis report that concluded that Canadian troops, using the strategies mandated by the Canadian government and those of other NATO members, cannot prevail in the struggle against the Taliban.

Then there is the Toronto think tank called the Planning Desk, which is set up as a corporation, rather than as a charity and is most active in various European countries. The Planning Desk, says its website, “is an evolving studio for public system design. Bringing together creative strategists, researchers and designers to improve the character, quality and efficacy of citizen-state interactions, we work with a range of clients and partners on projects which foster civic expression, institutional reform and add to our common quality of life.”

Canadian involvement in US think tanks is naturally more common. To take one example, Marie-Josée Kravis, a Montrealer who is married to the New York financier Henry Kravis, is a fellow of the Hudson Institute of Washington and New York. However different Canadian think tanks and think-tank people are from American ones, in certain ways, they share much more—neoclassical philosophy mostly—with their American colleagues than they do with their opposite numbers in Europe, where think tanks are on balance more diverse in their orientations and often more thoughtful. France, for example, has a rich think-tank culture. At one extreme it can be represented by the Ecole Nationale des Cadres d’Uriage, established immediately after the fall of France in 1940 to foster fascism in the young. It was noted for its intellectual rigour and innovation, as were some French think tanks at the other political extreme. In more recent times, think tanks have come to play an important role in German public life. The German term is *Denkfabriken*—literally, thought factories.

The devil wears Prada: The Fraser Institute

Judged on the basis of its cleverness, name recognition and influence on public policy by way of the media, the Fraser Institute, based in Vancouver, is Canada’s most successful think tank. It was founded in 1974 in reaction to the election of British Columbia’s first New Democratic government, “the leader of which [Dave Barrett], along with five Cabinet Ministers, had in 1969 signed a document subsequently called *The Waffle Manifesto for an Independent Socialist Canada*”. The Waffle wing, of course, had been quickly disavowed by the party mainstream, which Barrett himself joined.

Credit or blame for the idea of the Fraser rested with a pulp-and-paper industry executive named Patrick Boyle. Crucial to the realisation of the plan were, among others, Csaba Hajdu, an émigré economist from Hungary, and Michael Walker, a labour organiser’s son from Newfoundland, who had left his position as a Bank of Canada

economist and was consulting in-house with the federal Finance department. Walker became the executive director and by the time of his retirement in 2005 had overseen impressive expansion of the Fraser's budget, staff and research.

A significant series of articles on Canadian think tanks in the *Calgary Herald* in 2004 concluded that the strategy of such institutions is to bring about change by what a writer in the progressive journal *This Magazine* called their "phenomenal ability to attract media attention." Of this, the Fraser is the master.

The Fraser organises a great many conferences, symposia and colloquia, but its main means of spreading its ideas is the media coverage it gets for its findings and the books, many of them full length, published under its imprint, some of which the Fraser claims as bestsellers. One of the most revealing of these publications is the official history published on its silver anniversary: *Challenging Perceptions: Twenty-five Years of Influential Ideas*, which is the source of the quotation about the NDP, above. Permit me to quote from it further, selectively, to illustrate the Fraser Institute's ideology and then its methodology:

"Since the problem was *incorrect ideas* [my italics]," the document states, "the solution would depend upon an effective educational institute to inform Canadians about the consequences of particular courses of policy action." The phrase "incorrect ideas" calls to mind the "incorrect thoughts" discouraged, often forcibly, by some of the world's harshest authoritarian regimes.

The Fraser began modestly. In the first year, when it had only 65 members, its budget was only \$75,000. In 2007, the budget was \$11 million, and it has an endowment perhaps four times that. Then, as later, the money came from corporations and individual members. The Fraser is a registered charity in Canada, or, as Walker has admitted, "not a charity in the sense that most people use the term [but] one from the point of view of Canadian law." Later it acquired similar status in the US. Donors receive tax receipts for their contributions, enabling them to reduce their tax liability. This fact led to a celebrated dust-up in the *National Post* in 1999. Walker is a gentlemanly fellow, but in this case, however, his language was strong, as he was responding to a piece entitled "It's Time the Fraser Institute Stopped Taking Taxpayers' Charity". He defended not only the Fraser's need for its own registered charity status, but also its belief that such status should be withheld from schools and hospitals (on the grounds that they receive most of their funding from governments) and from a group called the Vancouver Society of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women (on the grounds that it fell outside the applicable legislation). For its first few years, the institute rented office space in downtown Vancouver, but in 1998 purchased a West Side office building, occupying one floor itself and renting out another to, of all people, the *Georgia Straight*, Vancouver's leftwing weekly, which naturally enough attacked its landlord in print from time to time. When I spoke with Walker there not long before his retirement, he remarked that the arrangement made for interesting conversation in the elevator. He also disputed the perception that the Institute is slavishly attentive to the concerns of the leading businessmen who are its financial backbone. We were sitting in a boardroom named after one of the leading

corporations; various other meeting rooms and the like, however small, bore plaques attesting to the generosity of such organisations as Hollinger Inc., the company formerly run by Conrad Black (whose business partner, David Radler, was a Fraser trustee).

Since the very beginning, the Institute has insisted that no member of the board of trustees (or any common member) should exercise editorial control over Institute publications or documents, which instead would be peer-reviewed internally by an editorial committee. Also, donors would need to accept that some of the Institute's findings might run counter to their own views, and furthermore that the Institute and its staff are "not in any circumstances to engage in any political activity." Indeed, they do not endorse political parties or individual politicians, but only push conservative ideas, which might happen to be Conservative ones as well. The ideas go well beyond the broad heading "economic" and touch on social conservatism while steering clear of gay rights, stem cell research and the usual hot-button issues. In recent years, for example, the Institute has paid considerable attention to the public school system, bestowing awards for excellence on school principals of whom it approves (though other principals have declined the honour and even mere nomination). Its interest in public education, it holds, is a service to parents battling the "education establishment".

The Institute's publications, including its monthly magazine *Fraser Focus*, are professionally and expensively produced, but they go to great lengths to avoid visual glibness or even an up-to-date feel, cultivating instead a dignified stodginess that does not detract from what the Fraser people believe to be their mandate. As to post-secondary education, that always has been fertile ground. "By the time the Institute celebrated its fifth anniversary in 1979," according to *Challenging Perceptions*, "almost every large Canadian university had at least one academic department that had adopted an Institute title as part of its required reading list." This is also one way the Fraser has made inroads in the United States (another involved opening an office in Seattle). Walker was proud of his international connections to figures such as Margaret Thatcher and a handful of barons and baronets, as well as to an assortment of US conservatives from William F. Buckley to the late Gerald Ford. More impressive were the Fraser's association with Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, both Nobel Prize laureates in economics (in 1974 and 1976 respectively). While never a primary focus, the Fraser's attempts to insinuate itself beyond Canada have been successful. Many of its books are translated into other languages, and other rightwing think tanks, in places such as Chile, have cited the Fraser as their inspiration.

The early years saw not only extraordinarily rapid growth, but also the creation of the Institute's single most effective tactic for reaching out to the public with the very core of its message: Tax Freedom Day, "the hypothetical date on which average Canadians have paid their tax bill for the year and started working for themselves." The idea was so simple—a kind of statistical sound bite—that it would soon be known and understood by, the Institute claimed, "almost every adult Canadian". It was all very well for Walker to write a regular column for the *Financial Post*, for example, but now they had a device for getting attention from newspapers in such places as Charlottetown and Whitehorse. The

political left had the Doomsday Clock of the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, showing the number of minutes remaining until nuclear midnight; the right had its Tax Freedom Day.

On a variety of other predictable issues, the Fraser kept restating its standard responses, or at least ones that, thanks partly to its own work, later became so. Quebec separatism, for example, was not about sovereignty; it was about alienation from the federal government and its heavy taxes. The CBC was inherently inferior to commercial broadcasting, and (here the Howe was in agreement) Canada Post should not enjoy a monopoly on carrying the mail. As early as 1979, the Institute made known its belief that publicly funded health care (like unemployment insurance) was not working. Later, it pronounced that the way to protect the environment was to put the job in the hands of the business sector. Always aware of the injunctions imposed on it by its charity status, it stepped carefully into organised religion, helping to counter what it (alone) regarded as the Catholic Church's drift to the left. Similar caution was necessary with respect to electoral politics. *Challenging Perceptions* puts it this way: "While maintaining its political aloofness [perhaps not the right word], the Institute was well connected to the Thatcher and Reagan 'revolutions' which occurred in the early 1980s."

Such views were still advanced through the Fraser's rash of books and other in-house publications, a list that also included a magazine for students created to counter the godless radicalism of student-produced newspapers. Increasingly, though, their views were also put forward in guest lectures by figures such as Conrad Black, Milton Friedman and rightist politicians, especially in a busy calendar of conferences and symposia. Some of these latter events were funded by other think tanks: the Donner Canadian Foundation and a mysterious American group called the Liberty Fund. The Donner, by the way, takes a tack that the far more bookish Fraser has not: a large annual prize for a book on social policy.

The real business of the Fraser Institute, however, wasn't preaching to the converted, but rather converting the public. *Challenging Perceptions* is quite candid on this point. Media coverage "has been actively cultivated throughout" the Fraser's history. At one point, Walker was writing regular columns for some of the tabloid press—the *Province* in Vancouver and the *Toronto Sun*—as well as giving a hundred broadcast and print interviews a year. These of course contributed to the total number of reportable hits for the phrase "the Fraser Institute". What set the Fraser apart was, not only its aggressive efficiency in manipulation of the media, but the fact that it set up a structure to criticise and monitor the media that was serving it so well. It is called the National Media Archive and is a kind of report card on the media, somewhat like the report cards the Institute produces on government. In both cases, the students being invigilated were given failing marks. The Archive once reported that the CBC was eight times more likely to criticise George H.W. Bush than Saddam Hussein. On the government side, the Institute was mighty proud when in 1985 the Macdonald Commission urged Ottawa to "pull back from direct intervention in many aspects of the operations of the economy, placing greater reliance, instead, on the operation of market forces", for this seemed another tangible proof that all the Institute's hard work was paying off. So the Institute squawked loudly when such recommendations were largely ignored by the Conservative government of

Brian Mulroney, who shot back on television by calling the Fraser Institute “extreme”—as extreme, he said, as the Canadian Labour Congress was at the other political pole.

In a long, wide-ranging and genuinely stimulating conversation with Walker, he showed me that he is not without libertarian impulses, though he denied that this was so. His remarks cogently reflect the tenor of the Fraser Institute’s corporate culture. He said:

- “I’m a conservative because I believe that the institutions of society have been created out of the primordial chaos by a process of gradual evolutionary adaptation [...] The government is arresting the process of evolutionary change in society. Government is a coercive force...”
- “When I describe social conservatives, I always describe people who believe that the government doesn’t have the intelligence or the sensitivity to handle your tax dollars well but does have the sensitivity and the insight to manage those other, less complicated issues, like your sex life. I find a lot of that, frankly, just amusing.”
- On same-sex marriage: “We have people on our staff who have been in those kinds of relationships, and my view is [that] we have an insurance plan, for example, and a pension plan, and if people want to have a relationship and indicate that so-and-so is the beneficiary, I have no problem with that whatsoever. [But] nobody has benefited by the re-engineering of language to meet a particular circumstance.”
- “We’ve doggedly said that we are not partisan. We are not rightwing. You know, some of the people whom we have worked with most closely have been socialists.”
- The Institute has long had offices in Toronto and Calgary. Recently it has opened one in Montreal. Why not one in Ottawa? “Why should we have one in Ottawa? You see, we’re not particularly interested in lobbying government [and are forbidden by law from doing much of it]. The purpose of the Fraser Institute is not to lobby [...] The purpose of the Institute is to change the climate of belief, to change what people believe.”

Montreal: a case study of local end-users

Taking Montreal as my case study, I thought, might point to some differences between the anglophone and the francophone press with regard to the think tank question. At the very least, I believed, the city should provide some insight into how think tanks meet, or fail to meet, the precarious trimorphism that metropolitan daily newspapers exhibit in their effort to be national, regional and local at the same time. I began with André Pratte, who as the *éditorialiste en chef* of *La Presse* presides over its influential editorial and op-ed pages while reaching out to the rest of Canada as a frequent contributor to the Comment section of the *Globe and Mail*. I also hoped that *La Presse* might provide the most practical comparison with its English-language opposite numbers, as it is not so top heavy with opinion as *Le Devoir*.

What I found is that Pratte does not accept the premise that the think tanks' high level of success is a result of their understanding the outsourcing of news. "I am not afraid of think tanks and I am not critical of the phenomenon itself", he told me. He explained the frequency of news stories, editorials and op-ed pieces based on think-tank research as owing much to the fact that there are simply so many think tanks at work generating the stuff. "Most of the think tanks obviously have an ideological bias of some kind, but they still think. A lot of them publish very interesting work: studies done on different phenomena. If you know what their bias is you can still find stuff that is very interesting. They have time to study problems in more detail, which most media don't have. We simply can't afford [...] to hire three experts in economics to see, for instance, whether there truly is a brain drain or not. We'll report on the brain drain and we'll ask a couple of specialists what they think about it, but we can't just have someone working a year on the numbers to see whether it's true or not." He compares the risks involved in using such material with those that arise from stories about poll results or news of supposed medical breakthroughs, when "the media take the data or the conclusions of one study or another and present it as the truth." In such cases, the problem rather is whether the newspapers are "careful enough, or maybe in some cases equipped, to question [further] once we've published the reports [...] whether the ideological bias has had an impact [and] whether conclusions are based on facts or on a bias." To his way of thinking, then, observers both within and without the media should worry less about publishing material generated by think tanks and more about following up on such stories using their own resources.

Presumably such follow-ups would be based partly on a determination of how the political stance of the supplying think tank has coloured a report and also whether the generality of readers take this question into account. "It seems to me", Pratte said, "that rightwing think tanks are more often identified as rightwing than leftwing think tanks are identified as leftwing. It's pretty rare that I see, at least in the newspapers I read, that the Centre for Policy Alternatives, for instance, is a 'leftwing think tank'". He believes "one of the reasons is that in many (though not all) newspapers, a lot of the journalists are centrists or a bit left of centre and automatically more sceptical" of pro-market institutions. Labelling think tanks according to this left/right polarity, he said, presents "a risk that the reader automatically then says, 'Oh no, what they're saying is not true.'" He added: "These guys [at the think tanks] have studied the issue and this is what they're reporting. But if you identify them [by ideology], then you sort of disqualify them in a way, or seem to be disqualifying what they're saying." Of course, a majority of reporters might be considered centrist or leftwing, whereas newspapers (the sole exception in English Canada being the *Toronto Star*) are owned by individuals with other allegiances. Yet neither Pratte nor any of the others I spoke to could recall an instance of a publisher or proprietor intervening in favour of publishing, or withholding, the findings of a think tank. In any case, reporters deal less with think-tank material than do columnists. He cited the example of a *La Presse* business columnist who has "written extensively about many think tank reports and also about Statistics Canada reports, ones from universities and so on. Obviously he's equipped. He's got the knowledge to be sceptical and critical of what one group or another would publish. The same is true for our editorialists here.

So I mean it is true, that for those reports as for any other news item, our reporters are not there to destroy a report or to call it the greatest report ever; they're there simply to report what's in the publication." Think-tank material is rarely mentioned in the paper's news hole, he explained, and he was not able to recollect an instance of such stuff being on page one. Perhaps that is one difference between the French-language press and its English opposite numbers: the latter uses more copy from the Canadian Press, which can be depended on to treat reports, studies and polls as news. Other facts, too, distinguish the French-language newspapers from their English siblings.

"There are fewer think tanks in Quebec than there are elsewhere", explained Pratte, saying "I don't know why this so. I have always felt that it's a loss for Quebecers not to have more people putting money into organisations that can look at different problems from various angles, as I guess the universities do in a way."

Pratte pointed out that the national think tanks "do have an impact here", but not so great an impact as elsewhere. "The Quebec media regularly report on what the Fraser Institute or the C.D. Howe do", but such sources are less influential than they are elsewhere in the country. In 2004 the Montreal Economic Institute became the first Canadian think tank to win the Templeton Freedom Award Grant for Institute Excellence, funded by Sir John Templeton, the mutual fund mogul. The Institute, which does not accept government funding, describes itself as "an independent, non-profit, non-partisan economic research and educational institute [that] participates in debates on Quebec and Canadian public policy by providing wealth-generating solutions, primarily in areas of taxation, regulation, health and education." Pratte summarises it as "a very rightwing think tank that is still very small and is funded by private companies. They're really for free markets in practically every area, including public transit or health."

The only other obvious think tank in Montreal (it has a Toronto office as well) is the Institute for Research on Public Policy, which Raymond Brassard, the executive editor of the *Gazette* and hence a leading figure in the English-language press in Quebec, says "we pretty much ignore [because] they write very long," in contrast to the Fraser or indeed the Montreal Economic Institute, which send "stuff that is intended for op-ed lengths, with some editing." Another reason for the *Gazette* to choose IRPP material cautiously is that Ian MacDonald, the editor of the IRPP's magazine, *Policy Options*, is a *Gazette* columnist (whose column, Brassard believes, has been improved by its author's immersion in think-tank research). The IRPP is a centre-right think tank that makes much of being indeed tri-partisan. Its former president, Hugh Segal, a prominent Conservative, headed a board that also has included Bob Rae and other past or present New Democrats. Such are its optics. One of its people, Aaron Freeman, was formerly associated with Democracy Watch, which Brassard calls "an organisation that I personally approve, quite thoroughly, and I think that most of the work they do is very good." It is, he believes, a somewhat special case. "I don't think Democracy Watch could be identified as leftwing or rightwing, but I think they are certainly a think tank and, I guess, would like to be a pressure group, chartered by pressure through the media." He adds: "There are partisans on the left and there are partisans on the right. There aren't too many people in this country who would identify themselves as partisans if democracy weren't transparent."

Brian Kappler, the *Gazette*'s editorial page editor, points out that reports and other findings by national think tanks such as the Fraser Institute do not usually "have a great deal of Quebec input", causing the paper to localise the material in ways that range from a sidebar to the original story or an in-house story generated on the occasion of such an outside report. He cites an example: "While university fees are rising outside Quebec, here they are still frozen." In that instance, the story would be the whys and hows of Quebec's marching to its own drummer. The most media-savvy think tanks, such as the Fraser Institute, but in this instance the Montreal Economic Institute as well, long ago learned to anticipate the need. As a result, they often, Kappler says, supply stories indicating "that Quebecers lead the country in thinking such-and-such, or come last." The day after we spoke, he ran a think-tank piece about a survey that showed that proportionately more Quebecers, than residents of other provinces, believe that funding alone will not shrink hospital wait-times or solve other dilemmas in the health care system. "Quebeckers always seem to be distinct, one way or another, whether it is sugar consumption or additives. This is the way we deal with these facts." Of course, calling, sometimes stridently, for privatisation of health care has become almost a crusade of the rightwing think tanks.

Reports made by an MP will indicate party affiliation. What about pronouncements made by "institutes" (that is, neither individuals nor actual institutions)?

Like most other dailies, the *Gazette* relies on Canadian Press for most stories of the Fraser Institute type, and the press co-operative usually, but not always, tries to contextualise its reports of such findings by the use of some descriptive adjective or adjectival phrase such as "the right-of-centre" or "the pro-market". Brassard admits, "We too often accept how the wires identify without really thinking about it. In other cases, the onus falls on the newspaper itself.

"I know that this has been a topic of conversation a few times in news meetings", he says. "We will be discussing a story, and Brian might point out that X is a leftwing think tank and we should take that into consideration when weighing the significance of the information." He adds that he himself believes that all references to think tanks in the paper should be identified. "I like to avoid *rightwing* and *leftwing*, because I find they're a little simplistic when you've got social conservatives and fiscal liberals, as well as fiscal conservatives and social liberals." But he believes that the paper should always provide context about the political orientation of the source. To date, he says, the *Gazette*'s website has been doing so more consistently than the newspaper itself.

A national end-user

Mary Janigan has an overview of Canadian think tanks that is rare if not unique, as she was doubtless the only journalist in Canada with a full-time assignment to cover public policy as a distinct beat. After years of writing magazine articles about the making of public policy, she moved to a column that ran in *Macleans*'s for four years, until the

magazine was taken over by Kenneth Whyte, the founding editor of the *National Post*. She had not yet moved to the editorial page of the *Globe and Mail* when I asked her to assess the performance of various think tanks from her own singular perspective.

Her impression (and no one else can claim wider experience—“I get everything, and I try to get more!”) is that only a few think tanks still distribute material through Canada Post routinely. At least one, the Centre for Policy Research Networks, uses digital communication exclusively. Most everyone else relies on email bulletins to make recipients aware of new studies or reports, which can then be sent to those who show interest (or those the senders believe should be interested). Some combination of the two delivery systems is usual. For example, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy (“a deeply estimable think tank” in Janigan’s view) will mail some special reports, but gives email notification of others, while the bulletins of the Fraser Institute are sent by email twice a month. Other think tanks, such as the Conference Board, the C.D. Howe Institute (which Janigan’s husband once managed), the Institute for Research on Public Policy and the Centre for Alternative Public Policy, are less regular but often deal in greater volume. All of them resurface regularly, in what they hope is a spirit of helpfulness, but without undue persistence. “I don’t feel pushed”, Janigan says.

She goes on to say that she is not a person driven by ideology and that, while recognising that many or most think tanks are, she tends not to pigeonhole them mentally as either left or right. That being the case, I ask which one in her view occupies the often difficult middle ground. She did not hesitate. “The reason the IRPP is fabulous,” she says, “is that they allow every idea to enter the fray.” Of course it has its hobbyhorses, as any think tank does. She calls attention to a fact that others might ascribe to charming eccentricity, namely the way that “Huey [Segal] is vaguely in favour of proportional representation [and] there are endless” references to and discussions of the subject in IRPP publications, which generally do not “deal with the rather serious problems of proportional representation even in the form in which Germany uses it.” Still, the Institute “has also put out some very valuable things about making Parliament work better.”

She cites an issue of their journal *Policy Options* on social policy. “You will not agree with half of the assertions in it, about medicare for example, but you get to read them and see them knocked down in the next article”, in which a health policy consultant argues in effect that “standard market economics don’t work in health care and here is why.”

I ask her which think tank, in her view as an end-user of their product, is the most sophisticated in its understanding of how to work with the media towards the goal of presenting their information to the public. She answers, “The IRPP, by a country mile.” But she always stresses the journalistic danger of putting too much credence in any one think tank’s findings, rather than looking at a number of different ones on a particular issue, comparing, contrasting, averaging and finding the mean (rather than consensus, which is obtainable only on neocon economic matters). The onus is on the reader as well. “Anyone who takes one column of mine and sees it as my whole view on [for example]

health care is as irresponsible as [someone] taking one report from a single think tank”, she says. “If a journalist seizes on one report as the bible but doesn’t understand that the world changes and circumstances change, that one’s views must evolve...” The sentence trails off in the face of the obvious.

Her expectations of them vary, but she is “wary of where think tanks are coming from.”

Some amateur number-crunching

A generation ago, the *Globe and Mail* published a bulldog edition that was available, bearing the next day’s date, on Toronto streets at 10 p.m. Often some important story on the front page of the bulldog would catch the eye of CBC Television’s national news, which was broadcast an hour later. If the story were journalistically sound and thoroughly unimpeachable, the producers of the newscast would ascribe it to “a Toronto newspaper”. If, however, instinct told them that the story was in danger of being contradicted or was otherwise a bit wobbly or speculative, they would credit “the *Globe and Mail*”. These days the situation differs substantially. The *Globe* and the CBC’s rival, CTV, have a common owner, a fact that encourages, if not the state of convergence that media owners have held up as a business ideal, then at least a kind of intramural cross-pollination, while the CBC is more inclined to go its own way editorially.

Donald Abelson, in his book *Do Think Tanks Matter?*, compiled quite informative tables comparing scores, in terms of the number of mentions in both the print and broadcast media between 1985 and 1999, by assorted think tanks. Like much of Abelson’s work, this was in support of analysing differences between Canadian think tanks and their American counterparts, but his calculations can be used to examine the Canadian situation alone.

In that 14-year period, for example, he found that the Conference Board of Canada had the greatest number of hits in newspapers and on television: 6,289, or an average of 456 per year, while the Fraser Institute, in second place, had 3,790, an average of 270 per year. Of these yearly averages, CBC Television news accounted for only 4.07 mentions per annum and CTV News, 4.2. By comparison, the Fraser Institute logged 3.3 mentions on the CBC and 1.9 on CTV. CBC Radio, the results show, paid far less attention to the Conference Board (1.2 mentions per annum), but somewhat more to the Fraser (4.1). Of the 22 think tanks in Abelson’s table, the C.D. Howe Institute had far and away the best success with CBC Radio (an average of 7.8 references per annum).

What these figures tend to show, though the conclusion is incidental to Abelson’s approach, is that think tanks do much better spreading their messages and their ideologies through daily newspapers than through broadcasts, for reasons that may be easily guessed. The work think tanks do lends itself more to the written word and numbers than to speech and pictures, and newspapers, with their letters-to-the-editor, editorials, comment or op-ed pages, as well as general news columns and earmarked sections, offer

not only more opportunities but also a great variety of opportunities. Between the lines of Abelson's figures, one can also sense the prudent presence of people such as Tony Burman the CBC's former news czar.

I wished to get a snapshot of how think tanks from different parts of the political spectrum fare in newspapers that themselves represent different philosophies. So I have compiled a little table of my own. It surveys the two national dailies—the far-right *National Post*, the centre-right or perhaps moderate *Globe and Mail* and the centre-left *Toronto Star*, which is not only Canada's largest circulation newspaper by a very considerable margin, but also the only leftwing English-language daily. I have tabulated the number of times each newspaper has published the names of three think tanks whose political orientation breaks down along the same lines: the far-right Fraser Institute, the centre-right or perhaps moderate C.D. Howe Institute and the centre-left Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. The survey covers a two-year period. I hope that this duration is long enough to give a clear picture, but short enough to preclude distortions caused by changes in the fundamental political and economic dispositions of either the think tanks or the papers. In a further effort to avoid statistical anomalies (even though they are in fact unavoidable), I have chosen a period—1 May 2003 to 1 May 2005—when calamitous economic events such as recessions and terrorist attacks should not have skewed the results.

The results, it must be admitted, make for something of a mixed-fruit comparison, as each publication's database cannot be sorted in exactly the same terms as those of the other two (please see my notes immediately below the table). But such as they are, here are the results:

	<i>Post</i>	<i>Globe</i>	<i>Star</i>
Fraser Institute	169	135	120
C.D. Howe Institute	190	131	49
Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives	14	40	41

Table: Number of mentions, 1 May 2003 to 1 May 2005

And here are the caveats in the form of notes.

At the *National Post*, the total includes references in news stories, business stories, columns, letters-to-the-editors and editorials in both the main paper and the Financial Post section, which has certain characteristics of a freestanding publication.

Breaking the total down into subtotals is difficult, except to say that the Fraser and the Howe naturally have their biggest impact in the business news found in the Financial Post section, where there were 108 mentions for the Fraser and 158 for the Howe. As for mentions in editorials specifically, there were 29 for the Fraser and 12 for the Howe, though in this case the database cannot readily distinguish between those on the main editorial page and those found in the separate Financial Post editorials. As for national news in the *Post's* A section, the Fraser had 32 hits and the Howe, 20.

What the above tends to show is that the provocative Fraser lags behind the more restrained Howe overall and in terms of the Financial Post section in particular, at least as measured in the number of hits; for even though the Fraser bests the Howe in national-news and editorial-page mentions, it is mentioned in the Financial Post section about a third less often than the Howe. These figures may reflect essential differences in the recent direction of the two institutes. As the Fraser has moved more aggressively into social conservatism (even while favouring the legalising—and taxation—of marijuana), it has naturally found itself in areas of intense public debate, the sort that often dominates news columns and provokes letters from readers. By contrast, the Howe, though it too is moving in new directions, still finds its bread-and-butter in sober analysis of economic trends.

The figures for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (one mention on the editorial page, seven in news and six in the Financial Post section) offer no surprises whatever. The Centre is useful to the *National Post* primarily as a negative example to be contradicted, and in any event its comparatively small budget gives it limited reach even at more politically moderate newspapers.

The results of a search in the *Globe's* database, which is more detailed, are even less ambiguous, though organized differently. Of the Fraser's 135 citations, 99 fall under the general heading of news, which in this case takes in editorials, commentary and letters, as well as national news stories and others found only in the various regional editions. Many or most deal with taxation, health care, defence, welfare, "economic freedom" and other core concerns of the Fraser. Another 26 hits come from the paper's Report on Business and are naturally economic or commercial in nature. The remaining 10 from elsewhere in the paper include anomalies such as "The Fraser Institute is shaking its jowls at me" by John Doyle, the paper's TV critic.

In the *Globe*, the Howe had 41 hits in the news sections, broadly defined as above. Because of the way the database is programmed and configured, it is possible to state that 21 of these were columns or op-ed pieces citing or mentioning the Howe; textual core-sampling of these suggests that perhaps as many as half were contributions supplied by Howe staff (and of course duly acknowledged as such in print). This suggests sophisticated targeting on the part of the Howe, as well as a natural sympathy between the *Globe* and the Howe as two institutions with considerable common ground. That they also share a special interest in business matters is one obvious inference to be drawn from the fact that, of the total number of hits throughout the paper, 78 are in the Report on Business. (The remaining 12 hits are scattered widely throughout the newspaper, with the arts and entertainment pages having the highest number—five.)

Of the *Globe's* 40 references to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, only four were on the op-ed page: no doubt another reflection of the Centre's comparatively weak infrastructure. Of the other references, many were in columns by *Globe* staff, often in support of on-the-other-hand opinion on taxation matters, about which the Fraser usually dominates discussion. Still other references came in letters. Occasionally, the

Centre was mentioned in actual news stories, such as coverage of the 2004 federal budget.

The entries found in the *Toronto Star* are broken down in yet another way. Of the 120 mentions of the Fraser Institute, 73 occurred in “news”—which in this case takes in national news, business news, arts and entertainment news and other sections that are classified as news to distinguish them from those of comment and opinion. Indeed, one reference to the Fraser appeared in *Wheels*, the advertising-heavy section devoted to automobiles. The remaining 47 references were in editorials, columns of opinion and letters-to-the-editor. By contrast, 32 of the 49 citations for the C.D. Howe bore the news designation, while only 17 were in editorials, opinion columns or letters. These figures tend to show that, while the Fraser had more success overall despite what many would suppose is the *Star*'s constitutional antipathy to the Fraser's core beliefs, the Howe got more of its mentions—roughly 60 per cent—in the news columns. This supposition about the importance of the *Star*'s bedrock principles is reinforced by the *Star*'s use of material relating to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, with its focus, whether overt or underlying, on social and economic justice. Rather more than half of the Centre's mentions—23 of 41—came in opinion columns and the like.

In brief, this little table, for all its methodological distortions, illustrates the extent to which a wide range of think tanks have access to the larger and more serious Canadian newspapers. What it doesn't show is the underlying question of journalistic ethics: By working so closely with think tanks, are the papers shirking their responsibility by outsourcing the news? That is the first big question.

The first big question

Neil Reynolds is easily one of Canada's most respected newspaper editors. He is surely one of the most widely experienced as well. After reporting for the *London Free Press*, he became an editorial executive at the *Toronto Star*. In 1975 he returned to his hometown, Kingston, Ontario, and transformed the *Whig-Standard* into a fabled journalistic enterprise and perhaps the paper most admired by other leading journalists, many of whom were drawn there simply by the desire to work with him. During his tenure, which was distinguished by editorial innovation, lengthy and expensive investigative series and a writerly sense of narrative, the paper won more awards than any other small daily had ever done, including three Michener Awards, the highest prize in the Canadian newspaper world.

He left the paper in 1992 and became first the editor and then the editor-publisher of two Atlantic dailies, the *Telegraph-Journal* and the *Times-Globe*, both in Saint John. Later he practised his magic as the editor of the *Ottawa Citizen*, which he rescued and reinvented both journalistically and commercially, before becoming the editor of the *Vancouver Sun*. At all of these places, he was characterised by a deep concern with the theories and ethics of journalism and the role of honest enquiry and commentary in a newspaper's relation to society. He seemed the logical person to ask about how his

various newspapers have dealt with think-tank material, for he is a famously thoughtful person on the subject of the profession. What's more, these papers are varied enough in their size, traditions and loyalties to constitute a sort of mini-survey.

Like so many dailies outside the largest cities, both the *Whig* and more especially the New Brunswick papers relied to a great extent on the Canadian Press cooperative for many of their "national" stories (which is what think-tank reports tend to be except when the think tank is strictly regional, like the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies or the Montreal Economic Institute).

In Reynolds' time there, neither the *Whig* nor the New Brunswick papers had a codified policy about identifying the apparent bias of individual think tanks. Rather, the papers usually characterised them in whatever way the CP's reporter or editor had chosen—which can sometimes mean no classification at all. By contrast, the *Citizen* and the *Vancouver Sun*, apparently like the other papers in what was then the Southam group, had limited policies of assigning each think tank mentioned to one broad political category or another.

"As I recall this exercise as it unfolded in real life", Reynolds said, "the drama came from a kind of guerrilla enforcement at the reporter or copy-editor level. Liberal reporters and copy editors made damn sure that the word 'rightwing' went in front of the X Institute; conservative reporters and copy editors made damn sure that the word 'leftwing' went in front of the Y Institute. It was a system of silent enforcement that didn't normally get much talked about on the floor [or] in staff meetings and senior-editor meetings." He added: "Once in a while, a leftist writer would slip 'extreme rightwing' in front of the Fraser Institute, at which point I got personally involved in a few scraps—'extreme rightwing' being code for SS torture and Nazi genocide."

In his experience, however, some members of the staff struggled to make clear not necessarily (or not only) their own viewpoint, but also that of their employers. He believes that this trait was often found in editorial writers particularly who "loved to use pejorative adjectives to help them reflect the particular bias of their paper." Reynolds supported the notion of identification, while rejecting rubber-stamped labels. Does he feel that references to think tanks, whether in the news hole, the editorial page or the op-ed, should characterise a think tank's ideological orientation? "In Canadian practice, yes. It's unfortunate that this conveys a pejorative touch to what should be a neutral exercise. It just is. I think it's different in the States, where there is an infinite variety of think tanks, many of which defy single-adjective labelling, many of which straddle ideological positions." An obvious US example is the Cato Institute, which, being libertarian in direction, endorses (one might almost say "fights for") fiscal conservatism and social liberalism at the same time. "I took the position that think tanks needed a moderate modifier", Reynolds said. "But my real concern at all of these papers was to find a way to report more aggressively on issues and ideas, and I exploited the think tanks to do it. At the *Whig*, [the managing editor] and I shared this thought. He got reporters to exploit leftwing think tanks; I got reporters to exploit rightwing ones. In the kind of anarchy we had there, it worked."

One of the lesser functions of think tanks is to provide a place for politicians and other partisan personalities to land when they fall or bail out. After his political career ended, Preston Manning, one of the founders of the Reform Party and for a time the leader of the Opposition in the House of Commons, accepted visitorships at two universities (Calgary and Toronto), while also becoming a senior fellow of both the Fraser Institute and the Canada West Foundation. Subsequently he raised \$10 million from executives in Alberta to start a tank of his own in Calgary: the Manning Centre for Building Democracy, described by Jeffrey Simpson in the *Globe and Mail* as “a new non-political institution designed to promote conservative ideas in Canada.” Mike Harris, the former golf pro and Conservative premier of Ontario, was likewise associated with the Fraser, which created a Mike Harris Fellowship in his honour. Ralph Klein, who when premier of Alberta made headlines by attacking the progressive Parkland Institute for spreading “anti-Alberta” data, became a fellow of the Fraser and the Manning institutes on retiring from office. Later he was a visiting fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Institute for International Scholars in Washington, DC (according to its website, “a non-partisan institute for advanced study and a neutral forum for open, serious and informed dialogue”). Of course, liberal political figures also use think tanks this way. For example, before Lloyd Axworthy, the former Foreign Affairs minister, became the president of the University of Winnipeg, he was the president of the Liu Institute for Global Issues at the University of British Columbia. His brother, Thomas Axworthy, also has think tank connections.

The phenomenon is by no means confined to Canada. Conservatives such as Edwin Meese, who was President Ronald Reagan’s attorney general and one of his national security advisors, is typical. He held the Ronald Reagan Chair in Public Policy at the Heritage Foundation. In the US, in fact, the practice can extend to family members, such as Lynne V. Cheney, the wife of the American vice-president and a fellow of the American Enterprise Institute, which is funded by such companies as Exxon Mobil. Some people become famous by establishing and running their own think tanks. Rudyard Griffiths, cited as one of “Canada’s Top 40 under 40” in the *Globe and Mail*, is the founder and executive director of the Dominion Institute, “a national non-profit organization dedicated to the promotion of history and shared citizenship”. He has parlayed this credential into a career as a television commentator, newspaper columnist, author and man-about-Toronto, someone who is the subject of magazine profiles and fodder for the gossip columns. Think-tank start-ups are especially interesting to judge from recent examples. In 2006, the Aga Khan, spiritual leader of the world’s 15 million Ismaili Muslims, joined with the Canadian government to begin the Global Centre for Pluralism in Ottawa. The following year, the Ontario government helped bring about the Centre for Jurisdictional Advantage and Prosperity, “a world-class think tank to study how countries can seize competitive advantage.” That was the description published in the *Globe and Mail*, which is partly owed by the Thomson family, another major contributor to the project.

Less remembered than the role of think tanks in the lives of former politicians is their role in the lives of former journalists. After ceasing to be the editor of *Macleans*,

Kevin Doyle, a one-time senior fellow at the International Institute for Sustainable Development, became the editor of the C.D. Howe Institute's publications programme (but is now the head of public relations at the University of Windsor). A much different case is that of Don Cayo, a very serious journalist indeed, who was Reynolds' editorial-page editor (and columnist) on the *Telegraph-Journal*, but left the paper to become the executive director of the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies. Later, he followed Reynolds to the *Vancouver Sun* as editorial-page editor and is now a business columnist there. The example of Cayo prompts Reynolds to an interesting and, as far as I can determine, original insight. In Saint John, "I assigned Cayo as a full-time writer on an ideas beat, and he went after think tanks, left and right, quite aggressively." In this, the *Telegraph-Journal* was aping some of the attitudes of papers with much greater circulations, in a way that was a constant throughout Reynolds' career. "At the larger papers, with beat writers in place and with parliamentary writers in place, the think tanks tend to get coverage as a matter of routine", he noted. "The disadvantage of this approach is that the studies produced by think tanks tended to get merely routine coverage: the five-paragraph or 600-word hit."

One of Reynolds' innovations at the *Telegraph-Journal* was to run a listing on the op-ed page of various new studies as they became available from think tanks of all persuasions, tacitly encouraging readers to order them for themselves. The solution called to mind the practice of some newspapers to list new corporate annual reports in a way that allows readers, by returning a coupon or checklist, to order those they desire.

Like many good ideas, it didn't spread. Nor did it last. In fact, Eric Marks, the young Rhodes Scholar who is the current editorial and comment editor of the *Telegraph-Journal*, seldom runs think-tank material: another approach to the problem entirely. He estimates that he now uses only six pieces a year from the Atlantic Institute and runs the Fraser's material no more than four times a year. In the latter case, "How much we print depends on format (giant research reports and statistical analyses are out) and relevance to New Brunswick." He goes on to say that plans are afoot to reconfigure the comment page to allow more and more varied think-tank research. He states that "since the politicians and business leaders are reading this stuff anyway, I've come to believe it's something of a public service to inform people who wouldn't otherwise come within a country mile of what these very prominent think tanks are advising." He also says that he likes not to describe them as think tanks, but as public policy lobby groups, when that applies, or as research institutes. "This may be a quirk of mine, but I think *think tank* still has associations with university research centres, and so there's an obligation to distinguish between the two. I also try to describe their particular point of view: conservative, free market, libertarian, whatever applies. I think it's important to indicate to readers when a research institute is working from a particular set of philosophical assumptions or seeking a particular political result. It's a matter of full disclosure."

This sentiment dovetails in a way with a statement by Reynolds: "We should probably be spending more time describing the academic standing and credentials of the scholar cited in each story rather than the political bias of the institutes themselves." But in many and perhaps even most cases, the reports are not the work of scholars at all. They

are the work of staff researcher/writers who are ideological samurai, or else of freelancers who assume the role of ideological *ronin* (those mercenaries also found in feudal Japan).

The second big question

What all this is leading to is the question of whether Canadian newspapers are behaving as responsibly as they might when they turn over so much space to ideologically motivated think tanks. The first response of course is to distinguish between news and comment, as I have attempted to do. But put that aside for the moment. Politics, being what it is—as much a matter of philosophy as one of partisanship—it seems only natural, and certainly not alterable, that the *National Post*, for example, will be partial to the Fraser Institute and the *Toronto Star* to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. But one must also look at their different readerships even to begin guessing at the readers' abilities to make allowances for news bias. This is a complicated task, because newspapers, in relation to one another and to their cities, are now organised along different lines than in the past, and the process of change continues.

In the nineteenth century, when a crowded and contentious newspaper environment was the norm in most cities, the so-called party press prevailed. Conservative readers read newspapers partial to, in the service of, and in some cases actually bankrolled by, Conservative politicians. Liberal readers, of course, supported Liberal publications. The two varieties of newspaper constantly denigrated each other, and both felt it part of their duty (and their right and privilege) to endorse one slate of political candidates over another in each election. For newspaper editors to hold elected office themselves was not unheard of. In the twentieth century, as newspapers became bigger and fewer (the two trends always went hand in hand), the party press died out. By mid-century only a few faint reminiscences of the old system survived, as in the fact, for example, that the *Vancouver Sun* actually had support of the Liberal Party written into its charter until 1958.

What replaced the party press was a system based on socio-economic class, which publishers preferred to think of as demography. In Toronto, to take the clearest example, people with some capital and good educations read and presumably believed the *Globe* or, as it became in 1936, the *Globe and Mail*. Call them, if only for the purposes of this report, the upper-middle-class. The lower-middle had the same relationship with the *Star*. As of 1971, that left the *Toronto Sun* to serve the requirements and prejudices of working people. Now, in the major cities, this balance too is starting to disappear or at least change significantly. In Toronto, to continue with that example, blue-collar readers are just as likely to read the giveaway dailies that have grown up there and in Montreal, Calgary, Vancouver and elsewhere. All the while, political affiliation has begun to reassert its importance, but more in broad philosophical terms than in narrowly partisan ones. Readership, a reflection of society in general, has moved far to the right at the same time as ownership of newspapers has been concentrated in fewer hands than ever before. Outside of the francophone press, all but a paltry few daily newspapers are, to one extent or another, rightwing, just as all but a paltry few think tanks are. Thus think tanks benefit

from the results of a transition that they themselves have been instrumental in helping to bring about.

With these points in mind, I questioned the representative editors I had chosen about the outsourcing question.

In earlier times, I asked Raymond Brassard of the *Gazette* in Montreal, would not staff reporters have done a great deal of the research now supplied pre-cut by think tanks? “That’s true”, he replied. “On the other hand, it is not. I suspect that there is probably a better quality of journalism done by the full-time journalist—probably as high as ever—and that the quality is probably as high as ever overall. I think that if you look at newspapers from, say, 80 years ago, you see not only a list of scoops but also quite a lot of press-release journalism.

“I understand your point and agree that if journalists could do [what think tanks do], then that would be their job. But a great deal of information is getting out [to the public] because the think tanks are actually doing it.”

As Brian Kappler at the *Gazette* pointed out, there is “the question of just how many things, realistically, would any newspaper be able to do in a given year. Series of five or six in-depth reports and the like? Whereas now, because of all the studies being done by pressure groups and think tanks, you may have a couple of them every week. Yes, it would be better done by journalists, I think. You would have a more balanced view and there would be less of an agenda, I suppose, though I can’t even argue that. By the measure implicit in your question, however, we should have a couple of engineers on staff for when a bridge collapses!”

He added: “I think it was William Randolph Hearst who said that news is something somebody wants suppressed and that everything else is advertising.” But to take Hearst literally is to conclude that think-tank stories are unpaid advertising for the think tank’s products, which usually are tax cuts, fewer public services, and war. As Brassard concluded: “You have to go to experts, and many of them are by their nature on one side of an issue or the other.” Across town, André Pratte of *La Presse* reiterated his views, which are not dissimilar. Outsourcing news? “No, I believe it’s just a case of more information being made available.” The danger is simply presenting it as gospel and also perhaps in not giving it equal qualification in both the news pages and the comment pages. “This is something that I definitely think is a problem a lot of media have. We’re not careful enough. Or in some cases we’re not equipped to question. Whether we publish the stuff [directly from think tanks] or report it as news, even when we question whether ideological bias had an impact and whether the conclusions are based on fact or a bias,” the hazard remains.

The thoroughly respected journalist Val Ross was editing the *Globe and Mail’s* op-ed page when I put the outsourcing question to her.

I asked: “Is the growing dependence on think tanks that we see in daily newspapers analogous to letting the cops tell you how to report a crime?”

She replied: “I take it that what you’re asking concerns a matter of degree, for to some extent that sort of stuff has always gone on. We ran a piece by Ron Haggart on the issue of how close reporters should be with, say, the RCMP or other police. It was all about how in his early days as a journalist his office was next door to the police and they would tell him when there was a big story. He would go out on it and then he would drink with the cops afterwards. And he didn’t think there was anything wrong with that.” She suggested that relying on think tank information comes no closer to outsourcing “than when Blair Fraser in the old days of Canadian political coverage was best friends with cabinet ministers and deputy ministers and was probably taking his cues from them.

“I think this is a real issue in the States where the think tanks are bigger, better funded and very bright, and lobbyists play a huge role in shaping Congressional agendas. Here they probably will have [a significant] effect [in time] but I would say the last election shows that the Fraser and even the Howe didn’t affect the agenda” by way of the media. Indeed, the media themselves generally didn’t seem to affect the outcome of what was, when we talked, the most recent federal election, or certainly not so much as one usually expects.

If one accepts the premise of outsourcing news, then one must accept that the *National Post* has sometimes differed from the *Globe* in being more proactive than passive. For example, the C.D. Howe Institute decided, following the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, to embark on a series of new reports it called the Border Papers, which were to appear every two or three months, the work of either one of their usual researchers or outsiders, academics usually, selected for the particular task.

The *Post* arranged for the Howe to release the papers on a certain day each week, having already ensured that the authors would synthesise their conclusions into an 800-word piece for the op-ed page, often with the op-ed editor’s assistance even after the Howe’s in-house editor, skilled at untangling academic prose, had done his work. The news side would look at each of the full reports as they appeared over a period of more than a year. Those judged to have news value were treated as such, while those found not to have the same public importance were acknowledged only through the op-ed column prepared in advance. As the reports were issued in advance and publication of the findings embargoed until the release date, the news side was spared the sort of snap decisions that can sometimes lead to overly hasty news judgment. Conversely, the op-ed page sidestepped what many consider a frequent difficulty with think-tank material: the tendency of the authors to become so obsessively focused on their own research that translating their core finding for a general audience becomes difficult.

This arrangement had other internal advantages for the *Post*, according to Natasha Hassan, the op-editor at the time (she is now at the *Globe*). For one thing, it sharpened the natural competitiveness between the *Post* and the *Globe*. As Hassan said, “You try to

convince Suzanne Walters [public relations officer of the Fraser Institute who has since moved on] that the study they're working on is one you would be interested in—that you might be able to give it front-page play if she would consider giving it to us exclusively: that kind of thing.” Her next remark was particularly telling. “That works sometimes, but [think tanks] are very careful, I think, not to alienate one [newspaper] or to give preferential treatment. Yet they also understand that different papers carry with them different focuses, whether it's political focus or format: tabloid versus broadsheet, Toronto versus a national paper, and so on. They are quite smart too in trying to place things [and in] approaching one organisation over another, knowing they will perhaps meet a more friendly reception” on a report or paper on a particular subject.

Another factor in the newspaper/think tank equation, she said, is that an editor who works closely with a variety of think tanks comes to know which ones give the highest quality information, an understanding that is then factored into the myriad editorial decisions that must be made every day in retail journalism. “We live in a society in which everybody is becoming more specialised all the time”, she said, and there are of course limits to any newspaper's resources. “If a think tank comes up with a PhD who has spent ten years studying a particular issue, who am I judge that we ourselves could do better? The job becomes to determine how important the issue is to the national discourse and, if it is, to make it accessible and get the word out—but also to question it. You want to have other people saying ‘This gentleman may have spent ten years studying the issue, but we found that...’ Then it's a good story. Then you think you've probably fulfilled your responsibilities to the readers.”

She drew an analogy to the sort of medical breakthrough stories that are one of the soft spots of daily journalism when editors accept them on faith, as is too often the case. If there were competing studies for each new drug trial or piece of medical prognostication, the information would be more useful; but in the scientific world, the give-and-take must be fought out, slowly, in medical journals. So the broader an editor's acquaintance with various think tanks—their biases, their leaders, the specialised researchers they bring in—the better the reader is served in the long run.

Conclusions (such as they are)

The questions around the use of think-tank handouts in daily newspapers is not a social issue, even though a great deal of such material concerns public issues and societal problems. It's not even an issue inside journalism. The topic of this report is little more than a micro-dot, however much it speaks, by implication, to Canada's political polarisation and other perennial conditions. The purpose of these pages is merely to ensure that the subject does not go to its grave without the brief moment of relevance owed it by the world.

In 1969-70, a special Senate committee chaired by Senator Keith Davey studied the concentration of ownership in the Canadian media and related journalistic issues. Its *Report*, written largely and anonymously by the veteran magazine journalist Alexander

Ross, was greeted as the best written government document anyone could recall. But it was a triumph of style over—not substance, for there was enough of that—but summary. One of its final injunctions to the profession of journalism, for example, was to always rewrite press releases before printing them. The equivalent statement here is to urge individual papers and certainly corporately linked groups of papers to develop a set of guidelines for identifying the political allegiances of think tanks. We do not object to classifying (as opposed to censoring) movies according to the age and maturity of their intended audience; this is a free service aimed at helping consumers make the choices they feel appropriate to themselves. Is there an important difference between tagging movies of an adult character from tagging think tanks as being politically conservative or politically progressive, according to some nomenclature agreed to by some laborious process? The movie audience and the newspaper reader base are the same people.

Here the concentration of ownership would actually be an asset. By putting a sensible policy in place across its holdings, the dominant proprietor, Canwest Global Communications, would go a long way towards firming up a spongy area in its newsrooms. An even more utopian scheme would be for think tanks to form an umbrella group that could, among other things, co-ordinate their published responses to a list of issues or events to which most of them pay attention: an impending federal budget, for example, or the state of the loonie, the role of the military, education issues, or the new pulse of Quebec separatism. Each think tank would of course continue to pursue its own pet subject. By working together to present opposing findings on various larger issues at certain logical times, they could, however, help to dignify the national discourse, attracting more attention from the media and the public while raising their own individual profiles and increasing their credibility even as they provided readers with conflicting arguments and different viewpoints to ponder. But as nearly all think tanks extol the cure-all of market economics above all else, they prefer to compete; co-operation that would dilute their individual messages is anathema to them. Too bad for everyone concerned.

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