

On the future of foreign policy think tanks in Canada

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Abstract

Will foreign policy think tanks face the same fate as so many “old media” organizations? The average Canadian has better access to global news and analysis today through a handheld device than the expert analyst of 30 years ago working from published sources at a foreign policy think tank. Furthermore, the increasingly blurred boundaries between domestic and international issues have made the distinction between foreign policy and domestic policy less clear. Canadian foreign policy think tanks have to respond to these challenges, as well as to the broader problem of parochialism in Canadian society.

Keywords

Foreign policy, think tanks, international policy, public policy, international relations

The contemplation of international affairs was once a rarefied activity that was the preserve of international relations scholars and foreign policy elites. Today, the average Canadian has better access to global news and analysis through a handheld device than the expert analyst of 30 years ago working from published sources at a research institute. Thanks to the digital information revolution, there is little of importance happening in the world today that is not documented and disseminated far and wide. This is a familiar dilemma for the conventional print and broadcast media industry, which has been struggling for years to respond to the democratization and fragmentation of newsgathering and delivery. Not surprisingly, many traditional media organizations have shrunk or gone under. Do foreign policy think tanks in Canada face a similar fate?

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This question applies also to the broader think tank community in Canada, which is small, underfunded, and less prominent in national policy debates than are think tanks in the United States.¹ Foreign policy think tanks, however, face an added challenge because of the increasingly blurred boundaries between domestic and international issues due to growing cross-border flows of goods, services, capital, and labour. The line is very thin between think tanks working on international issues that affect the home country and think tanks working on domestic issues with international implications. To the extent that domestic policy think tanks tend to specialize by subject area, they are more likely to establish a niche where genuine expertise and unique audiences can be cultivated. Foreign policy think tanks, on the other hand, have tended to focus on international affairs broadly or on specific geographies—areas of knowledge and experience that are increasingly occupied by well-travelled journalists/bloggers, retired diplomats, academics, and corporate executives.

In practice, the willingness and capacity of domestic policy think tanks to work on international issues is limited because of a lack of expertise and appreciation for the global dimensions of a given challenge. This state of affairs reflects the parochialism of the policy community in Canada and the tendency of political leaders to frame policy debates principally through the lens of electoral calculation. A good example is the energy infrastructure debate that is raging across the country, in the context of both North–South and East–West pipelines. While there has been frequent mention of the need to diversify Canada’s energy markets beyond the United States, very little policy research has been done on the evolving conditions of new markets, especially in Asia, and how energy policies in these markets affect Canada’s export aspirations. The Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada filled this gap by launching a work program on Canada–Asia energy and environment, and in so doing, to linking domestic policy debates with information and analysis on developments in Asia that impact Canada’s energy export ambitions.² In years to come, one would expect a greater merging of interests between “domestic policy” subject area-focused think tanks and “foreign policy” think tanks, perhaps to the point where the distinction between the two is no longer important. It is telling that there are no Canadian think tanks focused on relations with the United States, which is by far the most important foreign policy relationship for the country. There are, of course, many organizations in Canada producing policy research and analysis pertaining to the US relationship, but this work is as often framed

1. I adopt a broad definition of “think tank,” including both privately funded and publicly funded organizations that have public policy research as their principal function and whose primary audience is the policy community (government, business, and civil society actors who make or shape public policy). For the purposes of this essay, I do not include academic institutions such as the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto or the Balsillie School of International Affairs at the University of Waterloo/Wilfrid Laurier University, which have a broader educational mandate that includes teaching and academic publishing. I do, however, discuss later in this essay public policy programs at Canadian universities and their role in training the next generation of international policy analysts for the think tank community.

2. See <https://www.asiapacific.ca/publications/energy-environment> for a sample of research reports.

in terms of domestic policy (e.g., intellectual property, antitrust, energy, cultural protection, government procurement) as it is in terms of foreign policy.

The Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada (APF Canada) is in some ways a case study of the evolution of think tanks. Even though it was established in 1984 by an Act of Parliament, the foundation did not have a research department until 1995 and only defined itself as a think tank in the early 2000s. To the extent that the organization focuses on the Asia Pacific region, it is a “foreign policy think tank.” However, the recent work of the foundation has been as much about domestic policy as it has been about foreign policy. Indeed, the work program at APF Canada is organized by thematic streams rather than by geography, even though the accent is obviously on how Canada’s relations with Asian countries affect domestic policy priorities and vice versa. This shift in emphasis was motivated in part by the realization that Canada–Asia relations will be shaped not only by the nature and extent of Canada’s activities in Asia but also by the ways in which Canadians respond to the impact of Asia’s rise within Canada’s borders.³

Between 2010 and 2014, the foundation mounted a “National Conversation on Asia” to engage industry associations, community groups, First Nations, schools, and all levels of government on Canada’s response to the rise of Asia. The subject matter for much of this national conversation was domestic, including issues related to infrastructure, education, aboriginal rights, and resource development. It was not difficult to establish the impact of Asia’s rise on these seemingly domestic issues, but for an organization that was more comfortable talking about Asia than about Canada, the national conversation was also an exercise in re-defining APF Canada’s core audiences and constituencies. From an institutional perspective, one of the key lessons from the National Conversation on Asia was the need for staff with not only Asia expertise, but also strong subject area knowledge.

My personal experience at the foundation was very much shaped by the constant pressure to be attuned to domestic policy priorities. By responding effectively to this emphasis, the organization became more relevant to a Canadian audience, broadening the base of support (especially in Ottawa), which in turn enhanced the foundation’s ability to raise funds from both the public and private sectors. However, the fixation on “implications for Canada” was also a source of frustration in that it prevented the organization from looking more broadly and deeply at issues in Asia that did not have an ostensible and immediate connection to near-term Canadian policy priorities. For example, the issue of regional institutions and new governance architecture in Asia may seem far removed from the trade and investment priorities of Ottawa, but these are precisely the kind of longer-term developments in the region that will have lasting impact on Asian politics and economics. As it turns out, a new regional development bank was proposed by China at the Bali APEC Leaders’ Meeting in 2013 and launched barely a year later.

3. Yuen Pau Woo, “A Canadian conversation about Asia,” *Policy Options*, May 2011, <http://policyoptions.irpp.org/issues/provincial-deficits-and-debt/a-canadian-conversation-about-asia/> (accessed 15 May 2015).

Canada's muted response to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank hints at a lack of understanding, knowledge, and preparation for what should have been foreseen many years earlier.

An extreme form of "results orientation" has infected Canadian decision-makers and resulted in intellectual myopia among many senior policymakers and business leaders in the country. It has also bred a generation of young scholars and analysts who, under pressure from their superiors (or funding agencies) to come up with concrete implications for Canada, produce forced conclusions that are at best dubious and sometimes just plain misguided.

This "home country-bias" has created a broader malaise in Canadian foreign policy research, which is so tilted toward the implications for Canada that it has little original to say about developments outside the country. The audience for Canada-relevant policy research on international issues is small as it is; that audience shrinks even further when such research is presented outside the country. As a result, the expertise of Canadian foreign policy think tanks generally does not figure prominently on the global stage.⁴ This is certainly true in the Asia Pacific arena where Canadian participation in regional networks of policy research institutes and think tanks is limited to a small group of (aging) individuals. Whereas there is usually strong and consistent representation in regional policy forums by experts from the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and the EU, Canadian participation tends to be scarce and sporadic. This is not to say that there are no Canadians who are expert on international issues. Indeed, there are many Canadians who operate at the highest level of international policy research, analysis, and advice—but they typically arrive at those positions because of personal credentials that are developed in spite of rather than because of Canadian institutional affiliations. To put it differently, their expertise on international issues is more highly valued outside Canada than within the country.

The International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development (ICTSD) in Geneva is an example of a world-class organization that was founded in part by the Winnipeg-based International Institute for Sustainable Development and therefore has a solid Canadian pedigree. Canadian involvement in ICTSD today, however, is limited to a number of experts serving on the board or on research teams, with the Government of Canada nowhere to be found on the list of funding agencies. Another example is the role that other governments play in supporting international policy research institutes outside their own country by way of financial

4. Research institutes that consciously focus on international/global issues that do not connect with immediate Canadian priorities find it hard to raise money domestically, even if their work is internationally recognized and applauded. The North-South Institute (NSI) is an example of an organization that did quality work on international development issues, often for a global audience, but fell victim to funding cuts because Ottawa decided it was not relevant to Canadian interests. The Centre for International Governance Innovation is another example of an organization that is explicitly focusing on issues of global importance, including the reform of the international financial system. Unlike the NSI, however, it has a generous endowment provided by Canada, Ontario, and Research in Motion founder Jim Balsillie, which creates the latitude necessary to carry out broader and less Canada-centric research.

contributions as well as through secondments of senior officials/scholars. Japan, Korea, China, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and the EU provide this kind of support for Asia-based institutions such as the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA) in Jakarta, the APEC Secretariat in Singapore, and the Asian Development Bank Institute in Tokyo. The Canadian government does not place similar importance on these arrangements, presumably because the benefits to Canada are not immediate and are difficult to quantify.

The underlying problem is parochialism, which is the antithesis of a successful formula for Canadian think tanks working on international issues. This parochialism is at one level surprising given Canada's openness to immigration and its multicultural character, but it is in fact consistent with the orientation of the business community and with societal attitudes. For example, only 10.4 percent of small and medium-size companies in Canada were involved in exporting activities in 2011.⁵ And a 2014 poll by the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada found that 60 percent of respondents agreed with the statement "These days, I'm afraid our way of life is threatened by foreign influences."⁶

The insularity of Canadians will come as a surprise to many, especially urban residents who live in multicultural cities such as Toronto and Vancouver. But having a large immigrant population is not a substitute for direct overseas experience at the individual or corporate level, or for engagement on international issues by Ottawa. There is a tendency on the part of Canadians to get their international credentials on the cheap, by resting on comfortable nostrums about the immigrant composition of the country or the policy of official multiculturalism.⁷

The lack of public support for international policy analysis need not be in itself an impediment to vibrant international policy research if the receptor community for such research is strong and there are healthy exchanges between receptors and producers of policy research. There is, however, generally limited interest on the part of politicians, officials, and business leaders to draw on the research and advice of the think tank community, and insufficient interaction between policy, business, and think tank leaders to encourage the flow of ideas between these three domains. A big part of the problem is the political preoccupation with short-term priorities that inevitably filters down to the bureaucratic ranks, which have over the years shed much of their policy research capacity, especially in the Department of

5. Industry Canada, *Key Small Business Statistics, 2013*, <http://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/061.nsf/eng/02811.html> (accessed 15 May 2015).

6. Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, *2014 National Opinion Poll: Canadian Views on Asia*, available at <http://www.asiapacific.ca/surveys/national-opinion-polls/2014-national-opinion-poll-canadian-views-asia> (accessed 15 May 2015).

7. An example of this view is found in Darrell Bricker and John Ibbitson's *The Big Shift: The Seismic Change in Canadian Politics, Business and Culture and What It Means for Our Future* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2013), which assumes that Canada will become more Asia Pacific-oriented simply because of the growing numbers of Asian immigrants in the country.

Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (DFATD).⁸ The Canadian business community, in turn, has shown little interest in longer-term international policy research because Canadian business interests tend to be narrowly focused on the United States, and in any case, the vast majority of Canadian firms are small and medium enterprises, which do not have the financial wherewithal to invest in thinking much beyond near-term commercial priorities.⁹ This state of affairs is strikingly different from the United States, where there is a much larger pool of businesses with an interest in (and willingness to fund) think tank activity and a culture of private-sector support for policy research (sometimes but not always along partisan lines).

There is also a tradition of personnel exchange and talent mobility among government, academe, think tanks, and business in the United States and other countries that is lacking in Canada. While the Government of Canada has an Interchange Program that supports exchanges of personnel into and out of government service, few of these exchanges have been with think tanks or academia. There are exceptions, for example, the Clifford Clark Visiting Economist position at the Department of Finance¹⁰ and the Cadieux-Léger Fellowship for young scholars at DFATD, but it is uncommon for a senior government official to spend time at a think tank and vice versa. The Public Policy Forum, which is more of a policy convener than a think tank, has in recent years had senior officials seconded to the institution with great success, in part because of the forum's very close relationship with senior ranks of the bureaucracy and a work program that is well aligned with the policy priorities of the day.

The think tank community bears some responsibility for the difficulty it faces in generating interest among policy receptors. The quality of international policy research in Canada is uneven, with much foreign policy research and analysis amounting to not much more than a sophisticated understanding of current affairs augmented by some insider knowledge. While these kinds of informed international relations commentaries are interesting for a general audience, they often do not meet the needs of policymakers who require not only analysis but also prescription at some level of detail. Most people who work in policy think tanks have no direct experience working on public policy, and those who have public policy experience often lack training in public policy research.

8. A notable exception is Policy Horizons Canada, which was established in 2011 to provide strategic foresight on emerging policy challenges for Canada. It released a report in 2014 on *The Future of Asia*, available at <http://www.horizons.gc.ca/eng/content/future-asia-forces-change-and-potential-surprises> (accessed 15 May 2015). The predecessor organization of Policy Horizons Canada was the Policy Research Secretariat, which was established in 1996.

9. There are exceptions, for example, Sun Life and Manulife, both of which rely increasingly on overseas business, especially in Asia; and Teck Resources, which sells heavily into China and Japan. Two of Canada's largest industries—automobiles and oil/gas—are almost exclusively focused on the United States, which likely accounts for their lack of interest in policy matters beyond North America.

10. Brian Lee Crowley, founder of a relatively young think tank, the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, held this position in 2008–2009.

There are currently 10 Canadian universities offering Master's-level public policy/global affairs programs, five of which have an international focus.¹¹ Foreign policy and international affairs have traditionally been the preserve of political science/international relations departments, even though the needs of international policy today require subject area expertise that goes well beyond those disciplines. Areas studies departments in universities—another traditional source of talent for foreign policy analysts—provide excellent training in the history, culture, and language of foreign lands, but graduates from these programs often do not have the subject matter expertise or knowledge of contemporary issues to contribute to international policy work. Other social science disciplines, notably economics, have drifted so far into abstract theorizing that policymakers have lost interest in connecting with those academic communities. One result is that universities are not producing graduates who understand the policy process and who can perform international policy research and analysis. This is not to say that there are no Canadian academics who work on international policy issues, but they are few and far between. The incentive structure for academics militates against policy research and analysis, which means that those who do such work tend to be tenured and older. And the relative paucity of think tanks in Canada means that younger scholars who want to pursue a policy research career outside of or parallel with the academy have few opportunities to do so.

There are some encouraging signs. Four of the five internationally focused Master's programs in public policy or MA in international/global affairs programs at Canadian universities were established in the last decade. The University of Toronto is looking to expand significantly its MA in global affairs and the University of British Columbia launched a new Master's program in public policy and global affairs in fall 2015. In addition, a growing number of graduate-level programs in the applied and social sciences have international modules, including overseas experience, that foster a combination of subject area expertise and international awareness that is critical for policymaking on issues that can no longer be defined as simply domestic or foreign. It would seem, therefore, that the supply of graduates with international public policy skills is set to rise. The question, however, is where they will find job opportunities that correspond to their education and training. The answer for most of them is not foreign policy think tanks in Canada, considering that the sector has shrunk in recent years—a trend that is not likely to reverse itself in the foreseeable future. The longer-term answer has to be the incorporation of international policy considerations into the “domestic” priorities of different levels of government, the private sector, and not-for-profits. If, as a result of globalization, there is in fact much less distinction

11. Wilfrid Laurier University is the only Canadian school currently offering a Master's program in public policy with an explicit focus on international/global affairs. The University of Toronto (Munk), Carleton (NPSIA), and Ottawa (GSPIA) offer MA programs in international/global affairs, and Royal Roads University has an MA program in global leadership. Other schools with more domestically oriented MPP or master's in public administration programs include Calgary, Simon Fraser, York, Queens, Toronto (School of Public Policy), and Saskatchewan.

between domestic policy and foreign policy, the skills of international policy analysts will be sought out by a much more diverse set of employers. In this sense, the future of foreign policy think tanks is grim, but the future for internationally minded Canadians with policy skills could be very bright indeed.

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Author Biography

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