TRANSFORMING THINK TANKS INTO ‘POLICY HUBS’: 
THE CREATION OF RESEARCH–POLICY NETWORKS

by

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Statement of Originality

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or used for other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and the sources used have been acknowledged.

Christopher B. Vas
(September 2012)
Abstract

The development of public policy has been dogged for many decades by two main issues: the use of evidence and knowledge generated through research, and the engagement of external policy actors or non-state actors in the policy process. The collaborative role of universities and think tanks has seldom been considered in this context. This research thus poses the following three research questions: i) Does a policy network currently exist between government policy makers and university researchers? ii) Is there value in having an institutional structure that mediates and brings together government policy makers and university researchers by operating at the interface of research and policy? iii) What role can a think tank play within this context? How may this vary from the traditional role of a think tank?

In order to address these questions, this research systematically investigates the role of university research centres, and think tanks as mediators in policy interactions with the Australian government. Using an interdisciplinary perspective, this research also explores these issues using the heuristics of policy networks and governance. The Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) at the University of New South Wales, a university research centre, and the HC Coombs Policy Forum, a policy think tank at the Australian National University, were used as case studies in this research. As the Australian government founded both these institutions three decades apart, insights were provided into the ways government thinking has evolved.

The findings from this research are unique. While addressing the research questions, this thesis also outlines how think tanks must transform themselves into system-integrating institutional structures or ‘policy hubs’ that can be responsible for the creation of policy communities. Such policy hubs can also pursue activity at the interface of research and policy, helping bridge the divide between university researchers and public policy makers. In addition, this research also develops a three-tiered framework, Research-Inform-Interact-Integrate-Policy or ‘researchINpolicy’ (rINp), providing a mechanism to better understand how research can have an influence on public policy.
Preface

This research was born from sheer curiosity about how public policy could be better influenced through university research. My time as a policy adviser in 2006, in the Australian Federal Police within the Australian Government, ignited this interest. In providing policy advice I noted the lack of use of research in the process, despite the significant and relevant research being pursued within universities. This was not because it was not favoured or welcomed; rather, it was related to the problem of academic and government silos. This issue was identified and discussed by the senior echelons of the organisation. The opportunity I was offered by the Chief of Staff, Andrew Colvin, in establishing the organisation’s partnership with the Australian Research Council’s Centre of Excellence in Policing and Security gave me to believe that this might have been the answer to bridging the research policy divide. However, this was not really so. The challenges multiplied, and ranged from reaching consensus on policy problems that would form the core of the Centre’s programs on one hand, to the other extreme where issues were related to data and information access, timelines and outputs. Over a period of time, researchers and practitioners reached consensus and the Centre took off. Not for me, however. These issues still lingered in my mind. I took this up as a personal challenge that had to be continuously moulded and shaped. This doctoral thesis is the result.

In the early years of my research effort, Professor David Marsh helped me conceptualise some of the literature around public policy. The work of think tanks also piqued my interest; it is no secret that many synergies and overlaps exist between university research work and the work of think tanks. It was in this context that my interest took me down a path where I started to spend much more time
studying and researching networks. Given the sparsely populated think tank arena in Australia (in comparison to the United States), I explored the idea of including an comparative element within my research work. Having spent a little less than a year in India between 2009 and 2010, working on capacity-building efforts for the Indian Government, I soon realised that the research–policy problem was not unique to Australia.

The year 2010 was a turning point in my research journey for many reasons. Having commenced working with the Australian Government’s Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) on my return to Australia, I also met with Professor Adam Graycar—well known for transcending the boundaries of academia and government—to discuss the research–policy divide and to outline my research effort. Professor Graycar held roles as Foundation Director of the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) at the University of New South Wales (which is also one of the case studies in this research effort), Head of Premier and Cabinet in South Australia and Head of the Australian Institute of Criminology. After gladly accepting to act as adviser on my research panel, he said, and I quote: ‘you’re a man ahead of your time.’ While I was pleased to think that my work was cutting-edge, I also became aware of the review report Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for the Reform of Australian Government Administration that made recommendations related to some of the issues with which I was grappling. Around the same time, the Australian Government announced the establishment, in partnership with the Australian National University (ANU), of the Australian National Institute of Public Policy, which would house a policy think tank, HC Coombs Policy Forum, which would function at the interface of research and policy. Professor Graycar was announced as
Dean and Dr. Mark Matthews took up the role of Executive Director for the think tank.

In the context of this research, my interactions with Dr. Matthews began while I was at the AFP and he was head of the Centre for Policy Innovation at the ANU. In 2010, we reconnected, and he gladly agreed that I could use Coombs as a case study in my research. From late 2010 to early 2011, I interacted with many of the Coombs stakeholders from within both the University and Government to better understand how Coombs’ functioning at the interface was being viewed. I closely followed the Natural Resource Management (NRM) initiative, which I discuss in detail in this thesis. After having spent time, in early 2011, as a visiting scholar to Harvard University, Stanford University and the University of Wisconsin-Madison researching the similar issue of research–policy networks, I returned to Australia and commenced the analysis of the data gathered from the SPRC and Coombs case studies. It was at this time that I decided, based on good advice from Professor Marsh, to drop the international ‘compare and contrast’ element from the case owing to the complexity involved and the limited time available. Because the data I had collected was rich, there would be too many variables to contend with if I developed an international comparison. By August-September 2011, I had completed the analysis of the case studies. In October 2011, I commenced a secondment with Coombs working with Dr. Matthews. While this provided me with privileged access to information, allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of the working of Coombs and offered a much better appreciation of the issues associated with functioning at the interface of research and policy, this did not materially alter any content within the Coombs case study.
Finally, it is time to acknowledge individuals who have been integral to my research journey. I owe a great deal of gratitude and thanks to Professor David Marsh for helping me stay on track and in getting me through the ‘tunnel.’ Thanks to my advisory panel, Professor Graycar, Professor John Wanna and Professor John Ravenhill. It is also important for me to thank my public service colleagues, who have put up with my many ‘research and policy’ discussions: Natalie Bates, Chris Black, Katherine Van Gurp, Fiona Henderson and David Prince from the AFP; my DEEWR colleagues: Astrida Upitis, for her strong ongoing support, encouragement and reassurance, Anthony Fernando, Linda White, Ray Dingli, Nina Campbell, Gaye Kennedy, Erika Heywood, Liam Dee and the rest of the Workforce Innovation Team. To my once-case study subjects and now colleagues, Dr. Mark Matthews and Paul Harris, a big thanks for your ongoing support and inspiration.

I can also reassure my friends who have had to put up with my many research and writing excuses over the years, the journey is finally over… or is it? Finally, my family and most importantly, my better half, Divya, who has been patient, anxious and excited over the last four years about me completing the doctorate, this achievement is dedicated to you.
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