

Report to the CPSU Advisory Board

A One-Day Conference on ‘Think Tanks’ and the Work of CPSU Canada House, London, 18 November 2004.

As you know, the CPSU organised a one-day conference at which representatives of various British ‘think tanks’ discussed their dilemmas, opportunities, objectives and strategies. The discussion was divided between general issues, and topics more germane to the Commonwealth and to our work.

The conference was well attended -- by people from various ‘think tanks’, international agencies, the FCO, non-governmental organisations, the academic community, etc. The quality of the discussions was impressive. What follows is a distillation of some of the more useful ideas that emerged – with an emphasis on those that bear, or might bear, upon the CPSU’s work.

‘Think Tanks’

It was argued that to succeed, ‘think tanks’ need to do several things. They must make hard choices that help to generate clear, limited, focused strategies - - so that they find niches. They need to decide what activities to stress – working closely with governments or inter-governmental bodies, showcasing major thinkers on key issues, building up broad memberships, etc. Once these decisions are taken, they need to develop modes of funding that are appropriate. (‘Public interest consulting’ with the private sector is one of these, and is perhaps worth noting. One perceptive speaker asked whether CPSU was paying enough attention to the private sector as a source of funds.)

‘Think tanks’ also need to build the capacity of their staffs – so that they are equipped with specialised skills to perform their chosen tasks. This is also a way to retain their best people. Funding it, however, is no easy task.

They need to tell their stories through clear narratives, stressing their over-riding purposes. This is especially important if they depend heavily on project work – as CPSU does. ‘Think tanks’ will tend to be known by their larger projects, but these need to be transcended and linked to a master narrative.

They need to make the most of ‘insider’ contacts, while guarding against cooptation. They must keep their constituencies and locate themselves shrewdly within the potential markets for their work, while being cautious about becoming too close to certain elements within that market.

They might seek, as CPSU does, to combine research with advocacy – either quietly through lobbying, or loudly through public campaigns. But this is a difficult task. This implies that they should be concerned with the right kinds of ‘outputs’, and their audiences and impact. Whether by research, advocacy or some other route, they should seek to anticipate the emergence of important issues and to frame debates at an early stage.

CPSU more specifically might consider developing links to policy studies centres across the Commonwealth, many of which are formidable. It should also consider commissioning writings from academics and others around the UK and the Commonwealth who will often perform tasks for modest fees. It could thus become a ‘hub’ of networks of some promise.

Problems for the Commonwealth

When it considers its basic aims, the Commonwealth faces a serious dilemma. In the 1990s, it began to move away from the old ‘quiet diplomacy/consensus’ approach by pursuing principles in the Harare Declaration with errant member governments. It made some headway, but it also ran up against limitations in efforts to address the problem of Zimbabwe. It is not entirely clear where it goes from here. Will it be able to sustain its strength as a force capable of ‘preventive diplomacy’? And will the pursuit of greater democratization and respect for human rights become something resembling a completion of the process set in train by decolonization? The two things are interconnected, and may or may not be contradictory.

Some participants also raised concerns about the under-involvement of some potentially formidable member states – especially India, which has about half of the population of the Commonwealth, and its fastest growing economy. If it were persuaded to become more fully engaged – a decision that would enhance its international influence -- India would make a significant difference. (In mid-December, this writer intends to put this idea to the Indian Prime Minister who, prior to taking office, chaired a major Commonwealth enquiry.) India and certain other member state might increase financial contributions to the cash-strapped Commonwealth – and thus erode the dominance in that sphere of the UK, Canada and Australia.

Attention was called to some old, myths that we should bear in mind and perhaps address. One, which looms especially large, encompasses a pair of misperceptions that contradict one another but still coexist. In Britain, the Commonwealth is often seen as an organisation that inconveniently lumbers us with complaints and grievances from other – especially less developed -- member states. In other parts of the Commonwealth – in, for example, Australia where British MP’s have encountered this fantasy – it is seen as a

conspiracy to prolong British pre-eminence over former colonies. Neither is true, and both need to be tackled.

Important Emerging Issues: In General, for the Commonwealth and for the CPSU

It was argued that an 'associational' multi-lateral institution like the Commonwealth might be especially well-equipped to address issues such as the use of technology – and more precisely, information technology, at which certain member states excel – for development. A great deal of hype surrounds information technology. But the poor quality of a recent report by the UN's Millennium Project on science and technology presents others with an opportunity to make a greater contribution. The FCO believes that there is promise on this front, and the CHOGM in Malta next year which will stress information technology may be an occasion to make a start.

Issues linked to demographic change and migration will become even more salient and difficult in the years ahead. This was seen as an area in which the Commonwealth might seek to interact with the EU – possibly by developing closer ties to *la Francophonie* (on which this writer will report separately to the Board on 8 December).

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30 November 2004