



Sefydliad Ymchwil Gymdeithasol ac
Economaid, Data a Dulliau Cymru
Wales Institute of Social & Economic
Research, Data & Methods

The Rise and Fall of Think Tanks in Wales

A report by the Bevan Foundation on the
role of think tanks in Wales

Published February 2020

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The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is gratefully acknowledged.

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Contents

Foreword.....	4
1. Introduction.....	5
2. What is a ‘think tank’	5
3. What think tanks do	7
4. Think tanks in civil society.....	9
5. The emergence of think tanks in Wales.....	10
5.1. First wave: independent civil society think tanks.....	10
5.2. Second wave: evidence-based think tanks	11
5.3. Third wave: political think tanks	13
6. What Welsh think tanks do	13
6.1. Types of activity	13
6.2. Legal Status and finance.....	14
7. Challenges.....	18
7.1. Transparency	18
7.2. Financial sustainability.....	18
7.3. Quality of output	19
7.4. Political proximity.....	19
7.5. Impact.....	20
8. Conclusion.....	20

Foreword

This insightful and informative report makes an important contribution to our understanding of think tanks in Wales.

It might be argued that we are living at a time when there has never been more interest in politics – in how decisions made in Brussels, Westminster or the Senedd have a bearing on our everyday lives. Who would have thought, for instance, that the live-streaming service, *BBC Parliament*, would see the biggest ratings increase of any television channel in 2019?

We are seeing a heightened awareness within civil society of the inter-relationships between policy and wellbeing – whether, for example, this relates to fears about the potential economic and health consequences of leaving the European Union or the feelings of marginalisation that might be experienced by those who voted to ‘leave’ if we ‘remain’.

However, despite increasing awareness, current political debates appear to be fuelled by emotion rather than clarity of thought, by the demonization of the other side rather than a willingness to engage in dialogue.

In these febrile times, think tanks have an important part to play. They serve as crucibles for the generation of evidence-informed debate within civil society. They also provide a space for the dissemination and discussion of new ideas that seems to be lacking elsewhere.

Welsh-based think tanks are particularly important for Wales, whose interests are so often overlooked by the Westminster-dominated policy and media arenas. However, they face a number of challenges as well as opportunities, as this report demonstrates.

I would like to thank Victoria Winckler for this clear and scholarly account.

Professor Sally Power

WISERD Director

1. Introduction

Think tanks are well established round the world and have been so for decades. At least 14 UK think tanks pre-date 1945 and many more have been established since then.¹ Today there are an estimated 150 UK think tanks, excluding 'university-based policy analysis organisations,' with the 30 most well-known having a combined income of £111 million in 2017.²

Think tanks as a phenomenon have attracted some academic interest, particularly in the US, and there is also a degree of public concern, for example about who funds them and the quality of some think tanks' work. 'Shadowy'³ and 'murky'⁴ are just two of the accusations levelled at them and there have been calls for them to lose their charitable status.⁵

Wales' think tanks are relatively new and are mostly relatively small. The oldest is a mere 32 years old and the majority have yet to see their tenth birthday. Unlike UK think tanks they do not appear to have attracted any academic attention whatsoever. Yet think tanks are playing a growing role in Wales and Welsh public policy, from organising and stimulating public discussions, publishing reports and articles, and responding to Welsh Government and National Assembly for Wales consultations and inquiries, as well as encouraging good practice.

With think tanks now well-established in Welsh, it is timely to consider their development and role in civil society today. This paper provides a brief overview of some of the literature on think tanks and civil society, then gives an account of the emergence and activities of Welsh think tanks, before looking at the challenges facing them in the next decade.

2. What is a 'think tank'

What constitutes a 'think tank' has generated a large literature and considerable academic debate. Despite this there is no widely-accepted definition. Much of the literature on what constitutes a think tank originates from academia in the US and reflects the role of think tanks in US politics and civil society. There is much less debate about UK think tanks, and strikingly little amongst think tanks themselves. Significantly, there does not appear to be any consideration of think tanks in devolved or local contexts, in contrast to the large literature on think tanks in developing countries.

There are two approaches to defining think tanks identified by McGann⁶. The broad definition defines a think tank as an institution which provides public policy research, analysis and advice. For example, the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) at the University of Pennsylvania offers the following definition:

Think tanks are public policy research, analysis, and engagement organizations. They ... generate policy-oriented research, analysis, and advice on domestic and

¹ Day, A.J. (2002) **Think tanks in Western Europe**, in McGann, J.G. and Weaver, R.K. (2002) *Think tanks & civil societies*. Transaction: New Jersey

² Talbot, C. and Talbot, C. (2019) **Is public policy trapped in think tanks?** *Civil Service World*, 19th August. <https://www.civilserviceworld.com/articles/opinion/opinion-public-policy-trapped-think-tanks>

³ Green, J. (2017) **The shadowy think tanks that run the world**, 21st November. *Morning Star* <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/shadowy-think-tanks-run-world>

⁴ Medvetz, Thomas (2012) **Murky Power: 'Think Tanks' as Boundary Organizations** in Courpasson, D., Golsorkhi, D. and Sallaz, J. (Ed.) *Rethinking Power in Organizations, Institutions, and Markets* (Research in the Sociology of Organizations, Vol. 34), Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Bingley

⁵ Ainsworth, D. (2018) **Should think tanks lose charity status?** *Civil Society*, 12th November <https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/voices/david-ainsworth-should-these-think-tanks-lose-charity-status.html>

⁶ McGann, J. (2016) **The Fifth Estate: Think Tanks, Public Policy, and Governance**. Brookings Institution Press: Washington

international issues that enable policymakers and the public to make informed decisions about public policy issues.⁷

This definition therefore embraces university research centres, interest groups and government agencies, as well as more conventional, free-standing policy organisations. The breadth of organisations classed as think tanks is reflected in the listings in TTCSP's Global Go To Think Tank Index. The 2018 report⁸ includes an eclectic mix of UK organisations, ranging from university research centres such as the Science Policy Research Unit at the University of Sussex and IDEAS at the London School of Economics, to charities such as Amnesty International. Several of the think tanks listed have been challenged over their transparency and independence, including the Tax Payers' Alliance, Adam Smith Institute and Institute for Economic Affairs.

Wales even has its own think tank listed in the Index – the Institute of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences (IBERS) at Aberystwyth University. Yet despite the breadth, a number of relatively well-known UK think tanks, such as the Resolution Foundation and Joseph Rowntree Foundation, are not included in the index, nor are any other Welsh institutions.

There have been a number of attempts to refine this broad definition. Pautz argues that management consultancies should be considered as think tanks, not only because they offer policy advice to government but also because of their increasing role in shaping government policy.⁹ Many others have argued that autonomy is an important criterion, although Stone has called the emphasis on autonomy an 'Anglo-American predilection'¹⁰ while McGann points to state-sponsored think tanks in Germany and the Netherlands and to the government-funded RAND Corporation in the US.¹¹

There has been a similar debate about think tanks' financial status. McGann and Weaver amongst others have argued that think tanks should be not-for-profit,¹² a criterion that Pautz questions as disguising the financial exchanges that underpin almost all think-tank activity, whether for-profit or not.¹³

A narrower definition is based on organisational type or function. McGann summarises these as follows: universities without students (i.e. non-degree awarding), contract researchers and advocacy think tanks, and vanity think tanks (those set up to glorify its founder).¹⁴ However critics have argued that organisational type does not determine how the think tank operates at least in the UK and US. Medvetz¹⁵ sees think tanks as organisational devices – rather than organisations per se - for bringing together expertise generated by established institutions. This definition would therefore include activities such as task and finish groups or independent reviews or commissions. Stone¹⁶ suggests that this is a new form of think tank emerging in response to changing social, economic and political circumstances.

⁷ **Global Go To Think Tanks Index** web page <https://www.gotothinktank.com/global-goto-think-tank-index> accessed 27th Sept 2019

⁸ McGann, J. (2019) **2018 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report**. Think Tanks & Civil Societies Program: The Lauder Institute, The University of Pennsylvania <https://www.gotothinktank.com/global-goto-think-tank-index>

⁹ Pautz, H. (2011). **Revisiting the think-tank phenomenon**. *Public Policy and Administration*, 26(4), 419–435.

¹⁰ Stone, D. and Denham, A. (2004) **Think Tank Traditions: Policy Analysis Across Nations**. Manchester University Press: Manchester. p.2

¹¹ McGann, J. (2016) **The Fifth Estate: Think Tanks, Public Policy, and Governance**. Brookings Institution Press: Washington

¹² McGann, J.G. and Weaver, R.K. (2002) **Think tanks & civil societies**. Transaction: New Jersey

¹³ Pautz, H. (2011). **Revisiting the think-tank phenomenon**. *Public Policy and Administration*, 26(4), 419–435

¹⁴ McGann, J. (2016) **The Fifth Estate: Think Tanks, Public Policy, and Governance**. Brookings Institution Press: Washington

¹⁵ Medvetz, T. (2014) **Think tanks in America**. University of Chicago Press: Chicago

¹⁶ Stone, D. (2005) **Think Tanks and Policy Advice in Countries in Transition**. Asian Development Bank. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/156673/adbi-dp36.pdf>

Some academics have dispensed with definitions and defined a think tank as ‘organisations that describe themselves as such’.¹⁷ However not all organisations that describe themselves as a “think tank” would be regarded as one by others,¹⁸ nor do all widely-recognised ‘think tanks’ use the term themselves. For example, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Young Foundation and New Economics Foundation all now omit the words ‘think tank’ from their websites even though many would identify them as such.

Throughout the academic debate the views of think tank practitioners have been largely absent. Two recent studies that originate from think tanks themselves emphasise that the defining feature of a think tank is its core purpose. Lodge and Paxton, both based at the Royal Society for the Arts (RSA), argue that think tanks are policy-oriented and politically-savvy.¹⁹ They see that think tanks focus on solving problems rather than the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. And they note that think tanks have sophisticated strategies to get their recommendations adopted, for example operating in political networks. As such they are separate and distinctive from universities on the one hand and from specialist interest groups on the other. Similarly Slay, drawing on her experience at the New Economics Foundation and on interviews with think tank leaders, argues that two of the defining features of think tanks relate to their purpose. These are, first, that they seek to influence government policy and political parties and second that they are forward-looking and develop new ideas about social, economic, environmental or foreign policy.²⁰

From this perspective, think tanks are organisations that exist mainly or solely to develop new ideas and policies and to influence government. As such, while many different kinds of organisation may seek to develop policies and influence government, this does not in itself make them a ‘think tank’.

To sum up, the debate about defining think tanks seems to be no clearer to resolution than when it began more than twenty years ago and has arguably shed little light on the matter. In the midst of the discussions there are however three core themes: that think tanks decide their own agenda, that think tanks focus on changing public policy and that they mostly do so through seeking political influence. These three features distinguish think tanks from management consultancies and task and finish groups on the one hand, and universities on the other.

3. What think tanks do

Think tanks mostly undertake broadly similar activities. Stone²¹ describes what they do as being ‘second-hand dealers in ideas’, arguing that think tanks package and make attractive the ideas or policy proposals generated by others. She suggests that think tanks do not generally undertake significant research themselves - a view that organisations such as the Resolution Foundation and Institute for Fiscal Studies, both of which have extensive research programmes, could challenge.

¹⁷ Schlesinger, P. (2009) **Creativity and the experts: New Labour, think tanks, and the policy process**. International Journal of Press / Politics, 14 (1). pp. 3-20. ISSN 1940-1612

¹⁸ Lodge, G. and Paxton, W. (2017) **Innovation in Think Tanks Policy influence and change in developing countries**. Royal Society for the Arts: London. https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/rsa_innovation-in-think-tanks.pdf

¹⁹ Lodge, G. and Paxton, W. (2017) **Innovation in Think Tanks Policy influence and change in developing countries**. Royal Society for the Arts: London. https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/rsa_innovation-in-think-tanks.pdf

²⁰ Slay, J. (2017) **Impact: an enquiry into how think tanks create change**. Clore Social Leadership programme: https://www.cloresocialleadership.org.uk/assets/resources/Research-docs/Julia_Slay_Impact_how_think_tanks_create_change-FINAL.pdf

²¹ Stone, D. (1996) **Capturing the political imagination: think tanks and the policy process**. Frank Cass: London

Slay²² bases her account on the activities of contemporary UK think tanks which she says undertake the following activities:

1. Changing the terms of the debate about a subject or whether it is debated at all;
2. Bringing new statistics and analysis to light;
3. Generating recommendations for government.

In terms of changing terms of debate, Slay argues that some think tanks can generate genuinely new ideas. They can create space for new ideas to develop that may be off the public and political agenda. She says:

“They can play an important role in starting to make the unthinkable possible, and convening a space where politicians and opinion formers can safely engage with ideas that might be considered politically risky.”

Think tanks do also act as ‘second-hand dealers in ideas’, although those ideas do not necessarily originate from academia. Neal Lawson, founder of the Compass think tank, points out that ideas can equally originate from social movements such as those for the Living Wage.²³ The repackaging of ideas and the construction of a narrative to make them palatable to the public and politicians alike should not be derided. Lodge and Paxton argue that it is part of ‘flexing’ policy ideas to meet local circumstances, and that it is particularly important where government policy capacity is weak.²⁴

In terms of new analysis, some think tanks are now respected and credible sources of expertise in, for example, fiscal analysis or the labour market. Their analyses are often used to hold government to account, for example after announcement of the UK Government’s budget. Even think tanks that combine analysis with other functions have – or at least claim to have – expertise. Stone notes how some think tanks adopt pseudo-academic names and practices, and often emphasise their knowledge in a particular sphere.²⁵

The third, and perhaps best known, activity undertaken by think tanks is to make policy recommendations, usually to government. As Slay points out, the recommendations might be for ‘big headline pieces of policy ... or ... micro policy changes that sit within the existing policy framework’. It is much more difficult for think tanks to shape ‘big headline’ policies, although not impossible, but even micro-changes are not without their challenges.

Think tanks are mostly not part of formal political processes and so to get their ideas into government they operate in the political margins, hence the view that they need to be ‘politically savvy’. There are many accounts of how think tanks have adopted strategies to access senior decision makers and to persuade them of the merits of their proposals. However Slay suggests that achieving impact is more complex than simply having elite access to politicians, advisers and civil servants.

Slay echoes Stone in finding that think tanks need a ‘unique, and politically appealing, proposal’, based in evidence and reinforced by a coalition of partners asking for the same thing. The role of campaigns and alliances in achieving change is perhaps under-estimated in the UK, although it is an approach adopted by some influential think tanks such as the

²² Slay, J. (2017) Impact: an enquiry into how think tanks create change. Clore Social Leadership programme: https://www.cloresocialleadership.org.uk/assets/resources/Research-docs/Julia_Slay_Impact_how_think_tanks_create_change-FINAL.pdf

²³ Quoted in Slay, J. (2017) Impact: an enquiry into how think tanks create change. Clore Social Leadership programme: https://www.cloresocialleadership.org.uk/assets/resources/Research-docs/Julia_Slay_Impact_how_think_tanks_create_change-FINAL.pdf

²⁴ Lodge, G. and Paxton, W. (2017) **Innovation in Think Tanks Policy influence and change in developing countries.** Royal Society for the Arts: London. https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/rsa_innovation-in-think-tanks.pdf

²⁵ Stone, D. (1996) **Capturing the political imagination: think tanks and the policy process.** Frank Cass: London

Centre for Social Justice and more recently the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Interestingly, it is a tactic recommended for think tanks in developing economies.²⁶

Think tanks are helped or hindered by the political climate. It is much more likely that a think tank's recommendations will be adopted if its values and interests align with those of key decision makers. When the political climate is not right for their particular brand of recommendations, Slay suggests that think tanks can create space for debate of alternative ideas.

4. Think tanks in civil society

As with definitions of think tanks there are, unsurprisingly, a wide range of different views about their role in civil society. In a pluralist view, think tanks are seen one of a number of different types of civil society 'actors'.²⁷ Their policy proposals compete in an 'ideas marketplace', with the superior proposals winning the support of decision makers.²⁸ Crucially, this view associates strong civil societies and pluralistic political cultures with strong and diverse think tanks.²⁹

Critics such as Pautz³⁰ argue that these pluralist accounts do not recognise power relations in the competition for ideas. This is not just an academic concern: the question of the transparency of think tanks – and in particular who funds them and therefore whose interests they reflect – has risen to the fore recently. It has also been widely-recognised that there are a relatively large number of free-market think tanks and many fewer concerned with social justice, in part reflecting the interests of business donors. Indeed Mulgan suggests that in the UK many businesses prefer to fund think tanks rather than give direct to political parties.³¹

Elite theory recognises the power asymmetries in the market for ideas and sees think tanks executing policy research 'according to the interests of their financiers' and then communicating their findings to decision makers.³² However, elite theory assumes that all think tanks are funded by corporate interests: while this is clearly the case for some it is not so for all think tanks.

Elite theory also assumes a direct and causal relationship between the elite interests of think tanks and political decisions.³³ There is some evidence that think tanks of a particular ideological view have a major impact on government policy. For example, think tanks such as the Institute of Economic Affairs and the Adam Smith Institute are credited with being instrumental in the rise of Thatcherism,³⁴ while think tanks such as the Institute for Public Policy Research and Demos were seen as key in the development of New Labour.³⁵ But not all think tanks are associated with a political party – in particular those that are charities must scrupulously avoid being politically partisan. And some think tanks actively reject elite

²⁶ Lodge, G. and Paxton, W. (2017) **Innovation in Think Tanks Policy influence and change in developing countries**. Royal Society for the Arts: London.

²⁷ McGann, J. (2016) **The Fifth Estate: Think Tanks, Public Policy, and Governance**. Brookings Institution Press: Washington

²⁸ Pautz, H. (2011). **Revisiting the think-tank phenomenon**. Public Policy and Administration, 26(4), 419–435.

²⁹ Stone, D. (2005) **Think Tanks and Policy Advice in Countries in Transition**. Asian Development Bank. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/156673/adbi-dp36.pdf>

³⁰ Pautz, H. (2011). **Revisiting the think-tank phenomenon**. Public Policy and Administration, 26(4), 419–435.

³¹ Mulgan, G. (2006) Thinking in tanks: the changing ecology of political ideas. Political Quarterly vol. 77 no. 2

³² Dye (1978) quoted in Pautz, H. (2011). **Revisiting the think-tank phenomenon**. Public Policy and Administration, 26(4), 419–435.

³³ Pautz, H. (2011). **Revisiting the think-tank phenomenon**. Public Policy and Administration, 26(4), 419–435.

³⁴ Blank, R.C. (2003) From Thatcher to the Third Way: Think-Tanks, Intellectuals and the Blair Project. Ibidem Verlag: Stuttgart

³⁵ Pautz, H. (2011). **New Labour in Government: Think-Tanks and Social Policy Reform, 1997–2001**. British Politics. 6. 187-209. 10.1057/bp.2011.9.

interests, deliberately choosing to focus on, for example, people on low- or middle-incomes or on alternative economic models.

Pautz proposes an alternative, neo-Gramscian account of think tanks.³⁶ He argues that think tanks are 'ideological apparatuses' which produce 'legitimising discourses' which maintain or establish hegemony. Pautz locates think tanks in wider civil society, paraphrasing Gramsci as follows:

Think tanks can be understood as centres 'of formation, of irradiation, of dissemination' of ideas which are not simply 'spontaneously "born" in each individual brain' but need locations where they are produced and from where they can be disseminated as forces in the political struggle for hegemonic equilibrium. (p. 425)

Most insider accounts of think tanks' operations confirm that they navigate the different domains of politics, ideas and implementation, often building networks and alliances – or in Stone's words 'epistemic communities'³⁷ - to progress their claims as well as seeking direct access to decision-makers. The way in which one think tanks did so is vividly described by the founder of the Adam Smith Institute, Madsen Pirie.³⁸

This perspective overlooks the very considerable ideological variety of think tanks – including a number which would claim to be seeking radical change to the existing social order. Moreover, many think tanks are not passive agents but reflect deeply on their role and methods in order to ensure that they engage with, articulate and promote working class or marginalised interests.

In a more practical view, think tanks are often seen to play a positive role in developing economies and democracies. The UN, Overseas Development Council and others have all regarded think tanks as a means of improving evidence-based policy making and of supporting social and economic development. There are now think tanks in Latin America, Africa, China, India, Russia and even Mauritania.³⁹ Lodge and Paxton argue that think tanks have local knowledge and understanding that they can bring to bear on the policy process. Put simply:

They understand how change happens in their country. By being locally rooted they often have the legitimacy and credibility that external actors lack.⁴⁰

Indeed Lodge and Paxton argue that there is a strong case for donors building up a critical mass of think tanks to support development, and that this should be prioritised over support for other forms of NGOs.

5. The emergence of think tanks in Wales

Think tanks of any kind are relatively new phenomenon in Wales. The first think tank in Wales was established in 1987, and their number has grown to eight today. Their development can be broadly divided into three phases.

5.1. First wave: independent civil society think tanks

The period from the mid 1980s to the early 2010s saw Wales' first three think tanks emerge. All three are autonomous, not-for-profit bodies established by people active in civil society

³⁶ Pautz, H. (2011). **Revisiting the think-tank phenomenon**. *Public Policy and Administration*, 26(4), 419–435.

³⁷ Stone, D. (1996) **Capturing the political imagination: think tanks and the policy process**. Frank Cass: London

³⁸ Pirie, M. (2012) *Think Tank: The Story of the Adam Smith Institute*. Biteback: London

³⁹ Bruckner, T. (2017) Are think tanks promoting or distorting evidence-based policy? Research <https://www.researchtoaction.org/2017/04/think-tanks-promoting-distorting-evidence-based-policy/>

⁴⁰ Lodge, G. and Paxton, W. (2017) **Innovation in Think Tanks Policy influence and change in developing countries**. Royal Society for the Arts: London

rather than another institution. All three had their roots in the view that civil society in Wales was relatively weak, and that they wish to play a role in strengthening it through their various activities. They have adopted rather different ideological positions within this broad purpose.

The first think tank established specifically to work in Wales was the Institute of Welsh Affairs, which was founded in 1987. Former chair and co-founder of the Institute of Welsh Affairs, Geraint Talfan Davies, has described how the idea merged from concerns about the state of the Welsh economy and the lack of new ideas and challenge to the status quo.⁴¹ IWA was concerned that professionals and business people did not have a mechanism to contribute to government thinking. Writing about a proposal to establish an Institute he said:

We argued that “the general failure to harness the intellectual and business communities to a common end ... impoverished both debate and action” ... What was needed was “a body that can provide regular intellectual challenge to current practice”

p. 139-140

IWA operated on a voluntary basis, organising discussion lunches and seminars, for many years. It was only in the run-up to devolution that the IWA acquired its first paid staff, in 1996, with the new, devolved government providing a focus for its work.

The Bevan Foundation was established some fourteen years after the Institute for Welsh Affairs, in 2001. The founders shared similar concerns about the weakness of civil society in Wales, aiming to ‘give voice’ to people excluded from decision-making and enabling people to ‘come together’.⁴² But whereas IWA was initially concerned with professionals and business people, the Bevan Foundation focused on people in less privileged positions.

Like IWA the Bevan Foundation was also concerned about the lack of policy capacity in Wales and the absence of challenge to the new devolved government and its institutions. Its first director, Paul Starling, said:

There is a profound policy vacuum at the heart of Welsh politics: we have only a handful of lawyers who can draft legislation, and we have even fewer politicians in the assembly who are capable of the thinking necessary to policy. The policy vacuum is palpable - and public despair more so.”

It too focused its early work on the young National Assembly for Wales.

Some eleven years after the Bevan Foundation was established, Gorwel was founded by Conservative Assembly Member David Melding. Ahead of its launch, he too saw the need for more public debate although from a centre-right perspective. He said:

‘We just feel as a force, as a source of ideas and inspiration, the centre-right has not had the priority it needs and we need for the people of Wales to get the best social economic policies possible ... It really is meant to be the platform for discussion of ideas’⁴³

5.2. Second wave: evidence-based think tanks

The second wave of Welsh think tanks coincided with the rise of interest in the importance of evidence in public policy. A concern with evidence-based policy-making dates back to the

⁴¹ Talfan Davies, G. (2008) **Unfinished business: recollections and reflections on the arts, media and a young democracy**. Seren: Bridgend

⁴² Starling, P. (2001) **Wales must rediscover Bevan**, New Statesman 5th March

⁴³ BBC Wales News (2012) **David Melding AM reveals new social-economic think-tank plan**, 20th May <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-18136200>

early days of the Blair Government but gathered momentum as the 2010 coalition government launched various programmes including UK organisations such as NESTA and the network of ‘What Works’ centres. Their aim was to assist the ‘gathering, assessing and sharing the most robust evidence to inform policy and service delivery’.⁴⁴

The major initiative to bring evidence to Welsh public policy came with the creation of the Public Policy Institute Wales. A proposal to establish a policy institute was included in the 2011 Welsh Labour Party manifesto, with the express aim of bringing evidence-based policy-making into the heart of government. Former Welsh Ministers were keen to present their approach as responses to the specific challenges of informing and developing public policy in a devolved context.^{45 46} However, the inclusion of a ‘What Works’ centre within the new devolved body suggests that at that there had been at least some leakage of the UK Government’s approach into that of the Welsh Government.

The first Welsh Government and ESRC contracts for a policy institute were won by a consortium of universities led by Cardiff University. It began operations as the Public Policy Institute for Wales (PPIW) in 2013. It had a strong and direct relationship with Welsh Ministers: they commissioned specific pieces of work and then used PPIWs’ advice ‘to inform our decisions, to focus our interventions, to target our policies’⁴⁷.

In 2017, a new contract awarded by the Welsh Government and ESRC to Cardiff University saw the PPIW become the Welsh Centre for Public Policy’ (WCPP). As well as providing evidence to the Welsh Government, it also has a role as a What Works Centre and undertakes research on its own initiative. The WCPP describes its current role as follows:

The Centre collaborates with leading policy experts to provide ministers, the civil service and public services with high quality evidence and independent advice that helps them to improve policy decisions and outcomes.⁴⁸

The centre has continued to contribute to Welsh Government decision-making, with the current First Minister saying:

“It gives us high-quality independent evidence to challenge current assumptions and improve our decisions.”⁴⁹

Although WCPP was and remains by far the largest evidence-oriented think tank in Wales it was not the only one to emerge to provide evidence-based advice to government.

The newest evidence-based think tanks to be established are both at Swansea University and are not directly government-funded. The Bevan Commission – nothing to do with the Bevan Foundation – is a health-oriented think tank ‘hosted and supported’ by Swansea University.⁵⁰ It was set up by then Health Minister, Edwina Hart, at the end of 2008 as an advisory body to address ‘the needs of Wales and the concerns of the Minister, but [be]

⁴⁴ UK Government (2013) **Press release: New world leading evidence centres to drive better decisions across £200 billion of public services** <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-world-leading-evidence-centres-to-drive-better-decisions-across-200bn-of-public-services>

⁴⁵ Andrews, L. (2017) **How can we demonstrate the public value of evidence-based policy making when government ministers declare that the people ‘have had enough of experts’?** *Palgrave Communications* 3,11

⁴⁶ Jones, C. (2012) **New Welsh Institute for Public Policy to bridge research and government.** *The Guardian*, 5th November <https://www.theguardian.com/public-leaders-network/2012/nov/15/welsh-institute-policy-carwyn-jones>

⁴⁷ Cardiff University, quoted in Andrews, L. (2017) **How can we demonstrate the public value of evidence-based policy making when government ministers declare that the people ‘have had enough of experts’?** *Palgrave Communications* 3,11

⁴⁸ Wales Centre for Public Policy website <https://www.wcpp.org.uk/about/> accessed 16th September 2019

⁴⁹ Wales Centre for Public Policy news item Wales Centre for Public Policy acclaimed for outstanding impact on policy in Wales, 16th July 2019. <https://www.wcpp.org.uk/news-and-media/news-article/wales-centre-for-public-policy-acclaimed-for-outstanding-impact-on-policy-in-wales/> accessed 16th September 2019

⁵⁰ Bevan Commission website <http://www.bevancommission.org/en/about> accessed 16th September 2019

independent and able to raise and debate contentious issues free from ideological considerations'.⁵¹ It transferred to Public Health Wales in 2015⁵² and then to Swansea University in 2016. It now aims to inform thinking and practice in a range of health organisations, not only in Wales but world-wide.

The Morgan Academy was established as part of Swansea University in 2017. Named after Rhodri Morgan, former First Minister and Chancellor of the University, it aims to use research evidence to 'deal with the pressing 'wicked issues' of public policy in Wales and the wider World'.⁵³ It too has its sights on a wide range of bodies which might use its evidence, not only in Wales but globally.

5.3. Third wave: political think tanks

The third and final wave of think tanks comprises overtly political bodies, and may well reflect the current political climate. Although former Welsh Minister Huw Lewis attempted to establish a Labour Party think tank in 2007 entitled 'Wales 20:20', it proved short-lived.⁵⁴ Wales' two recent political think tanks were established in 2017. The Centre for Welsh Studies was launched in February that year, inspired by the vote to leave the EU. It claims to be the only right-wing, pro-Brexit think tank in Wales, and has a significant presence of Brexit-supporters on its management board. Despite its high-profile launch⁵⁵ the Centre for Welsh Studies is all but dormant – it was recently threatened with being struck off the register of companies for inactivity.⁵⁶

Shortly after the Centre for Welsh Studies appeared, Nova Cambria was launched by Adam Price AM at Plaid Cymru's 2017 Spring conference to be a 'platform for innovative ideas' that 'address Wales's aspirations and problems'.⁵⁷ It is strongly linked to Plaid Cymru: for example Plaid Cymru members receive its magazine as part of their subscription and it also includes several prominent Plaid Cymru supporters on its board and as contributors to its work. Despite this, it claims to provide a 'space for policy discussion, and non-sectarian, cross-party debate'.⁵⁸

6. What Welsh think tanks do

Like think tanks elsewhere in the UK, Welsh think tanks are concerned with ideas. And like all think tanks, they have a core output of articles, reports and events. But despite this, they are not all the same with variation in their outputs and ways of working. This section considers the activities of Welsh think tanks based on how they describe their work, e.g. on their websites or strategies. Table 1 shows the range and scale of Welsh think tanks' activity, based on a review of their websites for the period April – August 2019 and their latest annual report and accounts (if available).

6.1. Types of activity

In terms of subject matter, an analysis of the three most recent reports published on think tanks' websites show that they are almost all concerned with socio-economic issues. The

⁵¹ Bevan Commission (2011) NHS Wales: Forging a better future

<https://gweddill.gov.wales/docs/dhss/publications/110606bevan1en.pdf>

⁵² Public Health Wales (2015) Bevan Commission Memorandum of Understanding – report to board, 15th April.

[http://www2.nphs.wales.nhs.uk:8080/PHWPapersDocs.nsf/\(\\$All\)/B9417E47D69DBD9F80257E2A00582393/\\$File/38%2012%20Bevan%20Commission%20hosting%20agreement.pdf?OpenElement](http://www2.nphs.wales.nhs.uk:8080/PHWPapersDocs.nsf/($All)/B9417E47D69DBD9F80257E2A00582393/$File/38%2012%20Bevan%20Commission%20hosting%20agreement.pdf?OpenElement)

⁵³ Morgan Academy website <https://www.swansea.ac.uk/morganacademy/morgan-what-we-do/> accessed 16th September 2019

⁵⁴ Walesonline (2007) **Dumped minister's wake-up call for Welsh Labour Party**, 16th August

<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/local-news/dumped-ministers-wake-up-call-welsh-2232459>

⁵⁵ Masters, A. (2017) First 'openly Brexit' Welsh think tank launches, 16th February. <https://www.itv.com/news/wales/2017-02-16/first-openly-brexit-welsh-think-tank-launches/>

⁵⁶ Companies House register: <https://beta.companieshouse.gov.uk/company/10583930/filing-history>

⁵⁷ Nova Cambria website <http://www.novacambria.wales/about-us> accessed 16th September 2019

⁵⁸ Nova Cambria website <http://www.novacambria.wales/about-us> accessed 16th September 2019

themes within that are varied but as might be expected are mostly (but not exclusively) concerned with devolved matters rather than UK Government responsibilities.

In terms of activity, most Welsh think tanks have output that is typical of these bodies, involving a mix of articles, reports, magazines and events. Most Welsh think tank publications – including reports and online articles - involve output by their own staff, not least because they have expertise in the subject under consideration. However the Institute of Welsh Affairs is notable for explicitly providing a public space for debate with articles on its website and in its magazine commissioned from guest authors. These are mostly drawn from professional, third sector and business communities, continuing its original mission of providing a platform for groups in civil society.⁵⁹ Wales' political think tanks also rely on guest output, often by members of their boards.

There are more differences in how think tanks work. The evidence-based think tanks draw on the expertise of university staff, as might be expected, which is then collated into outputs such as reports and online articles. The political think tanks, again as might be expected, draw on the thinking of their members and supporters.

The Bevan Foundation and Institute of Welsh Affairs are different again. The IWA convenes cross sectoral stakeholders to produce evidence and secure commitments to 'bright ideas to transform Wales'. These are based on three new themes identified by its membership. In addition, advisory groups of members and experts from different sectors steer specific funded projects. The Bevan Foundation's model is to employ staff with expertise in its areas of interest. An explicit element in its theory of change is to generate evidence and insights by listening to people affected by an issue, as well as securing expert input via small advisory groups.

The Bevan Commission has a slightly different approach. Its main activity is to support innovation in practice through its Bevan Academy and an 'exemplar programme', although it does have some output of reports and articles that are mostly related to the programme.

6.2. Legal Status and finance

Despite their modest number, Welsh think tanks take a variety of forms. Table 2 summarises the legal form, income and expenditure and staff numbers of each think tanks.

Wales' think tanks are a mix of companies limited by guarantee some of which are charities, university departments and one private company. The small scale and relative fragility of Wales' think tanks stand out, with one notable exception. Several think tanks have a negligible income and none except WCPP has an income of more than £400,000. In contrast, UK think tanks typically have incomes of several million pounds: the Institute for Fiscal Studies' income in its last financial year was £8.8 million, the New Economic Foundation's was £3.3 million and the Institute for Public Policy Research's £3 million.

All but the WCPP have modest staff numbers or no staff at all. Those without staff rely on volunteer efforts to maintain their output, update their websites and organise events. The WCPP is the exception with a relatively large staff and some financial security, at least compared with others.

⁵⁹ Its latest strategy focuses on enabling wider participation in public debate

Table 1: Overview of Welsh Think Tank Activity

	Three most recent reports			Online articles	Magazine	Events	Other activities	Notes
Bevan Commission	Health Seeing the Big picture: and evaluation of the Bevan Exemplar Programme (Jan. 2019)	Health Transformation from within: a compendium showcasing Bevan Exemplar projects from 2017-18. (Jan. 2019)	Health Measuring healthcare outcomes (Dec 2018)	Articles on average three times a month but none published since April 2019. Mostly by 'Bevan advocates'	No	Annual conference, plus ad hoc events	'Bevan Innovators' programme for health care professionals to trial and test out innovative ideas.	The Bevan Commission's most recent work programme ends in 2019.
Bevan Foundation	Poverty Back to school? Local variations in help with costs of school meals and school uniforms (Sept. 2019)	Poverty Putting Poverty at the centre of the Welsh Government's 2020/21 budget (August 2019)	Economy Prosperous valleys, resilient communities (July 2019)	Articles on average once a week, mostly by staff.	Yes - Exchange published 3 x year.	Yes. Ad hoc mix of conferences, seminars, round table discussions and talks	Regular submission of evidence to Welsh Government consultations and assembly inquiries.	
Centre for Welsh Studies	Economy Cut then scrap: The case against Air Passenger Duty (March 2019)	Government A Lobbyist Register for Wales (March 2018)	Brexit Brexit and a UK Customs Union (Feb 2018)	Intermittent articles by guest writers.	No	None since 2017.	No	
Gorwel	Government Playing the royal card: A royal palace for Wales? (April 2018)	Politics Regional AMs and representative democracy (June 2017)	Equality A plea for pan-generational fairness (January 2017)	Very intermittent articles and news items	No	Intermittent.	No.	

Institute of Welsh Affairs	Economy & energy Factors influencing local and community engagement in renewable energy (April 2019)	Economy & energy A plan for Wales' renewable energy future. Essential actions to re-energise Wales by 2035 (March 2019)	Economy & energy How to protect, promote and achieve scale in community and local ownership of renewable energy (March 2019)	Click on Wales: publishes 5 articles a week by guest writers. Podcast series: approx. monthly but most recent in May 2019	Yes – Agenda published 2 x year.	Yes. Professional training, roundtable discussions, project launches, conferences.	IWA fellows recognise contribution to civil society. Occasional evidence to Welsh Government consultations and Assembly inquiries.	New strategy for publication in autumn 2019.
Morgan Academy [1]	None published			Monthly articles by staff and students. Most recent in June 2019.	No.	Yes, ad hoc programme of conferences, seminars and talks.	No	
Nova Cambria	None published			Blog: less than monthly. Essays and articles: ad hoc - frequency unclear.	New Nation x quarterly.	None listed	No	
Wales Centre for Public Policy	Government At the Tipping Point: Welsh Local Government and Austerity (June 2019)	Social Care Analysis of the Factors Contributing to the High Rates of Care in Wales (May 2019)	Governance Powers and Policy Levers – What works in delivering Welsh Government policies? (May 2019)	Commentary: 1-2 per month, linked to publications. Podcasts: only 1 released.	Research Apprenticeship Scheme Policy Fellows scheme Secondments	Forward work programme published autumn 2019	No	

[1] The output of the Morgan Academy has been affected by the death of its Director, Prof Mike Sullivan.

Note: The table is based on information published on think tanks' websites in w.b. 2nd September 2019. It does not therefore reflect activity that the think tank has not publicised nor forthcoming activity which had not been published

Table 2: Legal and financial status of Welsh think tanks

Bevan Commission	Company limited by guarantee	Accounts not yet available	6
Bevan Foundation	Company limited by guarantee Registered charity	Income: £244,000* Expenditure: £175,837 Free reserves: £77,328 * Including income received in advance	4
Centre for Welsh Studies	Company limited by share capital	Net assets: £9	None
Gorwel	Company limited by guarantee	Net assets: £14,659	2
Institute of Welsh Affairs	Company limited by guarantee Registered charity	Income: £327,008 Expenditure: £314,168 Free reserves: £70,280	6
Morgan Academy	Part of Swansea University	Not available	9 listed on website
Nova Cambria	Company limited by guarantee	Not yet submitted	Not available
Wales Centre for Public Policy	Part of Cardiff University	Research Grant of £5 million over five year period from ESRC and Welsh Government (plus £1.75 million institutional support from Cardiff University)	17 listed on website

7. Challenges

Think tanks as a whole are under pressure. In an excoriating essay written in 2008, Gerry Hassan accuses think tanks of both right and left of becoming part of the political establishment they wish to influence.⁶⁰ They generate ‘bland, meaningless, interchangeable phrases’ about ‘micro-delivery and buzz words’ rather than the real challenges of the day. Their ideas are produced by ‘identikit people’, they are used as platforms by politicians, and they fail to reflect on their own role and practice.

While Hassan’s vitriolic comments are arguably exaggerated and sweeping, there are some real concerns about the activities of at least some think tanks. These concerns do not appear to apply to Welsh think tanks, almost all of which are transparent about their funding and objectives. Nevertheless, these challenges risk spilling over into Wales, affecting think tanks’ collective reputation.

7.1. Transparency

A key concern about UK think tanks is their openness about funding. Funding matters – it is a rare donor or benefactor who expects absolutely nothing in return. Globally, the organisation Transparify rates think tanks according to how open they are about their funding and other factors.⁶¹ In the UK, it rates seven think tanks as ‘highly opaque and deceptive’, accusing them of ‘taking money from hidden hands behind closed doors’.⁶² WhoFundsYou similarly assesses UK think tanks.⁶³ It has awarded the lowest ranking to five UK organisations, four of which are also on the Transparify list of opaque organisations. As an anonymous contributor to the Economist put it:

... far from being engrossed in the noble pursuit of truth and reason, some ... think-tanks have begun to look more like brainy guns for hire, prepared to shoot off whatever argument a country or corporation gives them⁶⁴

No Welsh think tanks are rated by Transparify or WhoFundsYou, but most are relatively open about their activities. Those Welsh think tanks for which accounts are available make clear the origins of their major funding, although the funding of those which have yet to present accounts or which are part of bigger institutions is not known.

7.2. Financial sustainability

A much less often articulated concern for UK think tanks is their financial sustainability, although think tank fortunes do fluctuate as they come into or fall out of favour. For Welsh think tanks it is arguably the primary challenge. Civil society and political think tanks not only have small budgets but they also have fragile incomes. Both the Bevan Foundation and IWA report significant challenges in meeting their ‘core’ costs – overheads such as premises, accountancy and communications budgets.⁶⁵ ⁶⁶ Both are also heavily reliant on income from trusts and foundations for their project work and on small-scale commercial activity. This means that their income can fluctuate from year to year – it is only very recently that both these civil society think tanks have been able to recruit staff to project roles.

⁶⁰ Hassan, G. (2008) **The Limits of the 'Think Tank' Revolution**. Open Democracy, 8th September. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/the-limits-of-the-think-tank-revolution>

⁶¹ Transparify website <https://www.transparify.org/> accessed 16th September

⁶² Transparify (2017) **Think Tanks in the UK 2017: Transparency, Lobbying and Fake News in Brexit Britain**. <https://www.transparify.org/publications-main>

⁶³ Who Funds You website <http://whofundyou.org/>

⁶⁴ Anon (2019) Can think-tanks survive a post-fact world <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2019/05/29/can-think-tanks-survive-a-post-fact-world>, 29th May

⁶⁵ IWA Annual report and accounts 2017-18

⁶⁶ Bevan Foundation Annual report and accounts 2017-18

The civil society think tanks and political think tanks all request financial support or donations from the public and organisations to support their work. The IWA has the largest number of members and income from them, while it is a moot point whether contributions to a private company, the Centre for Welsh Studies, should be called 'donations'.

7.3. Quality of output

There are growing concerns about the quality of some UK think tanks' work, with compelling evidence that some has been shaped by their funders. All think tanks face a balancing act between funding and findings, but many are guided by codes of ethics or agreements about funders' involvement in the research and policy development process. However, several think tanks which have accepted funding from businesses have then made recommendations that aligned with those interests. For example, some think tanks have been funded by tobacco interests and then generated pro-tobacco research.⁶⁷ One think tank was found to have called for investment in small nuclear reactors having been funded by a company with an interest in the technology. Another called for the NHS to prioritise early diagnosis and treatment of ADHD in a report that was funded by a company that sold £1.7 billion of ADHD medicine in 2016.⁶⁸

Welsh think tanks do not appear to have been compromised in this way. It may be that the very paucity of external funding, particularly from business interests, has protected them from the risks of becoming 'the hired gun'. Balfour says:⁶⁹

[think tanks'] dislocation from hard interests creates funding challenges but also provides the best think tanks with their value: integrity, quality, and autonomy from power.

Where Welsh think tanks have been externally funded, they make the source of that support clear. But as with concerns about transparency, there remains a risk of their reputations being tarnished by UK think tanks' bad practice.

7.4. Political proximity

Many UK think tanks work very closely with Westminster decision-makers. Not only do they have close relationships between staff and politicians, but their staff come and go through a 'revolving door' between lobbyists, political parties, government advisers and business interests.⁷⁰ Hassan argues that this 'incestuous' relationship distances think tanks from wider civil society.⁷¹ Indeed, Hassan suggests that this elite model of influencing is one that should be adopted only by think tanks with business interests – those that seek to reflect the interests of civil society should, he suggests, be 'far away from the narrow world of Westminster and the conventional think tank.'

Some UK think tanks are already doing precisely this. They are seeking to work in and with communities on the ground, and some have shifted their focus away from influencing the political elite to trying to change public opinion. Indeed, argue that think tanks *need* to focus

⁶⁷ Bruckner, T. (undated) Think tanks, evidence and policy: democratic players or clandestine lobbyists? <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2017/02/08/think-tanks-evidence-and-policy/>

⁶⁸ -- (2018) Big companies 'buy influence' with funding for think tanks, The Times 12th April <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/big-companies-buy-influence-with-funding-for-think-tanks-6x85mpx9g>

⁶⁹ Balfour, R. (2017) What are think tanks for? Policy research in the age of anti-expertise <http://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/updates/LSE-IDEAS-What-are-think-tanks-for.pdf>

⁷⁰ Pautz, H. and Heins, E. (undated) **Government and 'independent expertise': think tanks represent a blind spot for critical analysis** <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/52710-2/>

⁷¹ Hassan, G. (2008) **The Limits of the 'Think Tank' Revolution**. Open Democracy, 8th September. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/the-limits-of-the-think-tank-revolution>

on engaging with the public because social media has increased the power of public voice and diminished to role of the so-called insider.⁷²

These concerns do not apply to most Welsh civil society think tanks. Despite Wales' small size and the complexity of relationships that many individuals have with politicians and decision makers, none enjoy the kind of cosy elite relationships between London think tanks and Westminster. Indeed, Welsh civil society think tanks are scrupulous in ensuring that they engage across the political spectrum and none, as far as the author is aware, have participated in activities similar to those sometimes undertaken by UK think tanks, such as holding seminars at 11 Downing Street⁷³ or limiting access to draft reports to members of one political party.⁷⁴

7.5. Impact

Last but not least are questions about think tanks' 'impact'. It is notoriously hard for think tanks to prove they make a difference. Stone notes; 'Rarely is there a one-to-one correspondence between a book or study and a particular policy change'.⁷⁵ Any changes that think tanks persuade decision-makers to adopt are often slow to realise and often further policy development by government changes or sometimes dilutes the original recommendations. Think tanks generally resort to indirect measures of their effectiveness, for example their media coverage, in lieu of evidence of direct impact.

Some have argued that think tanks are more effective at putting new ideas on the agenda helping shape and frame public debate rather than promoting specific policy recommendations. For think tanks that rely on external funding, delivering on a relatively vague and long-term outcome is challenging indeed.

Welsh think tanks of course claim that they 'have an impact' or 'make a difference', although how they define and evidence the difference they make is neither easy nor commonly done. The WCPP is the exception: as well as its own evidence of impact based on its theory of change and impact framework, both it and its predecessor PPIW are or have been subject to external reviews by its funders.

8. Conclusion

The protracted and unresolved academic debate about think tanks has not affected the rise of autonomous organisations which seek to inform public policy. Indeed it has arguably detracted attention from the wider questions about the relationship between evidence and ideology in decision-making, the mechanisms used by powerful elites to secure influence, and the issue of just where new policies and ideas come from.

Wales has seen the number of think tanks increase, including autonomous civil society think tanks, evidence-oriented think tanks either funded by government or affiliated with a university, and political think tanks. All have been triggered by devolution, with the Welsh Government being a focus for their work.

As in so many areas of civil society in Wales, its think tank sector is dominated by one relatively large, government-funded organisation with the others being very much smaller

⁷² Muller, A. and Hashemi, T. (2019) **Why the public should matter to think tankers** <https://weareflint.co.uk/blog/2019/1/27/why-the-public-should-matter-to-think-tankers>

⁷³ Charity Commission (2008) **Inquiry Report: Smith Institute** <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20080906031320/http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk/Library/investigations/pdfs/smithir.pdf>

⁷⁴ Charity Commission (2014) **Operational Case Report: Institute for Public Policy Research** https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/431599/ocr_institute_for_public_policy_research.pdf

⁷⁵ Stone, D. (1996) **Capturing the political imagination: think tanks and the policy process**. Frank Cass: London p. 219

and very much more fragile. As such, they are arguably less about promoting elite interests or perpetuating existing social relations and more about working in and with wider civil society. It may be that in future certain interests realise the decision-making power of the Welsh Government and its institutions and seek to buy influence through Wales' think tanks. This is something on which think tanks themselves as well as wider civil society should be vigilant.

Wales' think tanks face major challenges. They have their internal requirements of generating funding, delivering high quality output and reaching the right audience (whoever that may be), all on a shoe-string. But they also face the risk that their reputations will be damaged if opprobrium over UK think tanks spills over into Wales. Opinion polling by a communications agency found that only 60 percent of members of the public knew what a think tank was, and just 3.7 percent could name one.⁷⁶

Love think tanks, loathe think tanks or don't even know or care, Wales' think tanks are a small but established feature of civil society in Wales. As they stand at present, they are a long way from the 'dark money' which tarnishes many London-based think tanks. And so long as they are, Wales' think tanks should be recognised as part of the rich mix of organisations contributing to policy developing in a maturing country.

⁷⁶ Anon (2019) **New think tank ranking: less than 4% of the UK public can name a think tank**
<https://weareflint.co.uk/blog/2019/6/25/new-research-less-than-4-of-the-uk-public-can-name-a-think-tank>