

***Shaping European Union Policy:  
The Significance of Think Tank Activity***

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite a growing academic interest in notions of agenda-setting, advocacy coalitions, and the role of ideas in the development of the European Union (EU), little attention has been given to the role of think tanks. EU-orientated think tanks are not a new phenomenon. Some of those operating from a national base have a longer history than the EU itself. Others however are still in their infancy. Most of the exclusively EU-orientated think tanks only emerged in the 1980s, and the European Commission's internal think tank is just ten years old. There appears to have been a growth in think tank activity at the European level in the last two decades, perhaps simply explained by the deepening of EU competences, the increased impact of EU policy-making on member states, and thus a heightened awareness of all things European. Some national institutes are responding accordingly by increasingly moving from a specific domestic to a European-focused agenda. As a consequence of increased policy activity at the EU level, the growth in think tanks may also have arisen out of EU institutional and national administrative needs for greater policy advocacy.

Therefore, addressing this lacuna in both the EU and policy literature through an analysis of the form and extent of EU-orientated think tank activity is warranted. By focusing upon the routes and procedures that permit such input, this paper examines the extent to which think tanks can contribute to EU policy formulation.<sup>1</sup> It identifies varying levels of think tank activity, highlighting some of the most significant think tanks, and distinguishing between the varieties of research institutes and their missions of influence. The aim is to offer a preliminary assessment of the relevance of think tanks within the European arena for generating ideas and providing knowledge on EU issues.

## ACCESSING THE EU POLICY ENVIRONMENT

In assessing the significance of think tanks upon EU policy processes, it is important to be clear what constitutes this sort of research institute. The art of definition has preoccupied numerous writings on think tanks, and whilst there has been some acceptance of what constitutes this type of policy entrepreneur, it is acknowledged that there is no one definition.<sup>2</sup> With respect to the EU, it is futile to engage into a lengthy debate about definition - an exclusive definition simply cannot be applied to EU-orientated think tanks given the varying contexts in which EU policy is shaped. As Wallace stresses, it:

*"makes little sense to define a 'think tank' too precisely. The functions which think tanks fulfil - research relevant to public policy, promotion of public debate, the questioning of the conventional wisdom, the formulation and dissemination of alternative concepts and policy agendas - can be fulfilled in many ways, under different constraints".<sup>3</sup>*

Therefore, this analysis adopts the perspective that think tanks are relatively independent organisations, engaged in research on a broad scope of interests. Their primary aim is to disseminate that research as widely as possible with the intention of influencing policy-making processes. Denham and Garnett argue that despite the

problems associated with defining think tanks, there are two main objectives that these bodies aim for: to influence the climate of opinion, and to inform public policy decisions.<sup>4</sup> This offers a simple, broad, but useful means for framing this examination of EU-orientated think tanks given that there is no direct or consistent comparison between regional, national, and supranational arenas.

Undoubtedly, the EU is a complex system. Many theoretical attempts have been made to conceptualise the European polity, and it is not intended to re-examine this debate here. However, a single model is inappropriate for analysing EU policy-making - the multi-level nature of the system, the operational differences between policy sectors, and the informal as well as formal nature of policy-making necessitate theoretical flexibility. Nevertheless, whether one accepts multi-governance theories, policy network analysis or new institutionalism, there is common recognition that EU policy-making is more than simply bargaining between member states, and that non-state actors have an important role to play in shaping policy outputs. This refers not only to their ability to promote certain interests in the formulation and decision of policies, but to their capacity to generate ideas and provide expertise. The political culture of the EU is such that there is a reliance upon ideas and knowledge for agenda-setting and policy formulation, and research institutes constitute one of a plethora of internal and external sources of policy advice at the EU level. Identifying the types of EU-orientated think tank, and the level of operation may help to ascertain their relevance within this advocacy community. Given the multi-level nature of EU policy-making, there are also a variety of access points, or target audiences for think tanks, with some providing financial support. The EU system is relatively open in comparison to other political systems. As Peters points out, the EU may have its “rigidities” but they are less formalised than within member states.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, there is a much wider constituency for think tanks at the EU level.

The EU Treaties formally charge the European Commission with the initiation of policy, and it is crucial in the agenda-setting and formulation stages of EU policy-making. As Mazey and Richardson suggest, it is the EU level marketplace for ideas and interests.<sup>6</sup> It is a key audience for EU-orientated think tanks as it is “the agent that largely designs the policy process in terms of which procedures to use, which actors to include, and how to define policy issues”.<sup>7</sup> Laffan has gone so far as to suggest that the European Commission itself could be seen as a think tank.<sup>8</sup> Whilst this is an interesting claim, the other executive functions of the European Commission exclude it from the simple definition offered above. However, it does have its own internal think tank, discussed below.

The relationship between EU-orientated think tanks and the European Commission is mutually dependent. The Commission is the formal initiator of EU policy, and as such is a natural think tank constituency. However, the Commission can still be seen as an “adolescent bureaucracy”.<sup>9</sup> Compared with EU member state structures, it is both small in size and fledgling in development, and accordingly relies on internal and external sources of policy expertise. Indeed, the Commission has actively encouraged the growth of policy communities at the EU level. Although the following statement was specifically referring to interest groups and was issued in response to post-

Maastricht calls for greater transparency within the EU, it does reflect both the Commission's desire and need for policy advice:

*"The Commission has always been an institution open to outside input. The Commission believes this process to be fundamental to the development of its policies. This dialogue has proved valuable to both the Commission and to interested outside parties. Commission officials acknowledge the need for such outside input and welcome it."*<sup>10</sup>

It sets up consultative and expert committees, composed of national officials, independent experts, academics, and representatives from interest groups. Individual *ad-hoc* think tanks are established by a Directorate-General of the Commission to conduct research on a dossier, normally to assist in the preparation of the corresponding Green Paper. All of these committees could be viewed as varieties of think tanks. Indeed, some groups, such as that convened to report on audio-visual policy in 1994 title themselves as think tanks. Some of these have a longer shelf-life than others, but the majority are transient in character. To pursue analysis of the role of think tanks in EU policy processes, an additional element has been added to what constitutes a think tank. Whilst implicit in other definitions, permanence is an explicit criterion in this research on EU-orientated think tanks.

The Commission remains the main initiator of EU legislation, yet published documents do not specify where proposals originate from. Some of course evolve out of Treaty obligations, policy developments, and policy management. Others are the result of direct requests from member states, the EP, business and industry, and interest groups but generally reflect overall EU policy development. However, some proposals are more innovative, perhaps even more radical and can be influenced by outside ideas and expertise, and in this case think tanks as members of the advocacy community. The Commission does fund some of the think tanks identified here, either directly or indirectly through consultancy. Although it is accepted that think tanks can receive government or in this case EU funding providing that it does not compromise their research freedom, a favoured status may evolve.

From an EU institutional perspective, the Council of the EU can also initiate legislation. Formally, this is permitted by Article 152 of the EEC Treaty which states that the "Council may request the Commission to undertake any studies which the Council considers desirable for the attainment of the common objectives...". Informally, member states can request that the Commission embark on policy discussions in a given sector. Consequently, national governments as members of the Council of the EU are also think tank constituencies, either at the level of the permanent representations in Brussels, or more widely within the domestic policy arena. Since implementation of the Single European Act (SEA 1987), and more importantly the introduction of the co-decision procedure by the Treaty on European Union (TEU 1993), the European Parliament has begun to exert greater influence upon policy discussions. In certain policy areas it has become a co-legislator with the Council of the EU, and as a result of the Amsterdam Treaty that finally came into force in May 1999, its significance within the EU institutional framework has augmented. Whilst the majority of the European Parliament's activity focuses upon the decision stages of EU policy-making, there is certainly opportunity for it to play a

role in policy formulation, and in particular in those sectors where it has greatest decision-making powers such as the internal market, consumer protection, employment, social security rights, vocational training, public health, and the environment. To this extent, EU-orientated think tank constituencies also include national political parties either at the domestic level, or at the transnational level where their European colleagues are members of the European Parliament. Regional interests are specifically but not exclusively promoted within EU structures through the Committee of the Regions, established by the TEU in response to the EU's identity crisis and the reaffirmation of the subsidiarity principle. Although it has limited consultative powers, certain think tanks may perceive its members as a potential constituency. They may view the Economic and Social Committee (EcoSoc) which represents business, industrial, trade union, and consumer interests in a similar vein. However, it appears that EU-orientated think tanks approach these corporate bodies and interest groups directly, rather than through EcoSoc.

As highlighted below, the corporate sector is a key think tank constituency given the variety and importance of business interests within EU policy-making, and remains an important source of funding for several of these research institutes. Again, this is a significant organisational factor given the potential for compromising their independent credentials. Other EU-orientated think tank audiences include non-governmental organisations and interest groups, academia, other policy institutes and foundations, and EU citizens. The extent to which they will consult these groups, or target them in the dissemination of their research varies according to the particular think tank. One particular issue that can have a substantial effect upon the relevance of think tanks is whether certain interest group representatives become favoured for their policy advice, and in the eyes of the European Commission mutate into independent experts. Although think tanks do not engage in direct lobbying, the distinction between lobby and tank can become blurred and there are certainly some examples of this fudging at the EU level. Overall, EU-orientated think tanks have wide access into EU agenda-setting and policy formulation. The Commission is unsurprisingly a common constituency given the reciprocal nature of relations in the agenda-setting and formulation of EU policies. Other preferred routes for influence vary according to the remit and level of activity of the particular research institute.

## **EURO THINK TANKS**

Four levels of think tank activity can be identified within the EU. The most clearly defined EU think tank is the research body within the European Commission itself, known as the Forward Studies Unit. Its primary objective is to generate ideas for internal Commission consumption, thus serving a particular audience and functioning at a specific level. Second, are those independent research bodies operating within the supranational arena that are either focused upon EU affairs or embrace a broader European remit. Variations can be discerned in terms of their ideological standpoint and approach, yet they are exclusively orientated towards European issues and tend to base themselves in Brussels. The third level is a broader category as it involves the plethora of national think tanks that either examine EU issues, or those that absorb European issues into a wider policy discourse. They constitute a large and varied

group of think tanks whose emphasis upon European as opposed to domestic issues may shift, and whose individual remits and ideologies vary widely. Finally, there are European interest groups, organised at the transnational level and often referred to as Euro-groups, that have developed think tank characteristics. The latter category is arguably the hardest to identify, blurring the distinction between think tank and lobby group. However, they appear important given the significance of interest group activity at the supranational level, and the proliferation of these bodies in Brussels since the mid-1980s. In advancing these four levels activity following sections analyse some of these think tanks, but to assess every individual research institute is beyond the scope of this paper. It should be stressed that all four categories are seen as different varieties of research institute contributing to the generation of ideas on aspects of European integration. They have the same goal, yet can be distinguished by the varying levels at which they are organised, the constituencies they seek to serve, and the way in which they conceive the domestic-supranational dichotomy of European Union policy-making.

### **The Forward Studies Unit**

The least visible think tank operating at the EU level is the European Commission's internal research body. The Forward Studies Unit (*Cellule de Prospective*) was set up in 1989 by the then President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors. Its establishment was a time of heightened dominance of EU policy formation by the President. Delors wished not only to sustain the momentum of the internal market programme and the relatively successful relaunch of European integration, but to stamp his personal mark on the EU policy agenda. Consequently he charged the Forward Studies Unit, as its name suggests, with a broad five-year mandate to monitor and evaluate European integration by examining questions of medium-term interest for the Commission. The Unit was also given the task of establishing and strengthening relations with national research institutes, as well as responding to specific Commission requirements such as the preparation of studies and reports on policy dossiers. Each year Delors and his *cabinet* identified specific research projects for the Unit to consider on what he identified as priority areas, which were then presented to the appropriate Commissioner and Directorate-General. The Forward Studies Unit originally comprised twelve *fonctionnaires*, headed by Jerome Vignon, a close friend, but not an avid pro-marketeer to the extent of other advisors of Delors.<sup>11</sup>

Setting up this 'insiders' think tank was unprecedented in EU history, yet assessing its impact upon the policy agenda is complex and rather subjective. Middlemas argues that the Forward Studies Unit was crucial to the formulation of the 1993 White Paper on Industrial Policy, and that its examination of *Europe 2000* was taken up by the Belgian Presidency and developed into the White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment in the same year.<sup>12</sup> Whilst one can identify elements of the Forward Studies Unit's reports in the latter White Paper, it may simply be the case that the Unit was reflecting popular opinion at that time. Cini points out how the Forward Studies Unit was "able to circumvent many of the ingrained policy stances that emerged time after time from certain Directorates-General".<sup>13</sup> On the one hand this could be seen as positive, and part of the general relaunch of European integration by introducing new practices.

However, there are criticisms of the manner in which the Forward Studies Unit conducted its research under Delors. The presentations tended to be absolute in terms of the agenda they were to serve, restricting the European Commission's room for manoeuvre to that which was palatable for Delors. The Forward Studies Unit was "a place where the Commission President could subcontract parts of his operation of intellectual exploration to people he trusted".<sup>14</sup> Some Commission officials felt that their authority was directly threatened by this very personal think tank, and that it had essentially been absorbed into Delors' *cabinet*. Its existence began to undermine the collegial ethos of the European Commission. Throughout its history, there has been a fine balance between the need for effective leadership of the Commission and its collegiate structure. Leadership has been shown to be of great significance for the dynamism of European integration. However, the *Delors Mafia*, which included the Forward Studies Unit, reduced executive accountability. Over time, former officials have become more critical of the negative effects of Delors' control over the Commission college. Even Grant, whose work demonstrates great respect for Delors, states that his "personal system of command and control had begun to damage the Commission's internal organisation, sap the enthusiasm of its officials and contribute to the tarnishing of its image".<sup>15</sup>

Given the increasing political and public calls for executive accountability, Jacques Santer shifted the remit of the Forward Studies Unit when he took office in 1995. It was even rumoured that he would close the Unit altogether. Instead, he introduced a new five-year programme that identified similar lines of research, but was far more thematic, and arguably orientated to a more open and longer-term framework of analysis than work conducted during his predecessor. These themes include legitimising the European project (clearly a recognition of the public distance and indifference to the EU in the post-Maastricht environment), managing the geo-political and socio-economic transitions within Europe, promoting a European model of society, and examining issues of governance at the EU level. Santer has tried to stifle previous criticism by emphasising the discursive nature of Forward Studies Unit reports, and some insiders feel that the Unit has now changed in tone and approach. Its continued existence must reflect a perceived value by some, and especially Santer and his advisors, of its contribution to the generation of ideas at the EU level.

There are now fourteen members of the Forward Studies Unit, under the direction of Jean-Claude Thebault, supported by technical and administrative staff. The aim is to represent as many member nationalities as possible, as well as providing adequate expertise in the numerous and varied EU policy sectors. Each member coordinates a particular project which contributes to the overall thematic parameters set out in the five-year programme, and current research topics include Europe in 2010, the information society, and Central and Eastern Europe. Studies are normally discursive in style, except when specific evaluation reports are requested. Any recommendations are confined to the end of the documents, but are not recommendations in the formal sense. The Unit reflects the academic approach to its work, painting scenarios rather than formalising specific policy options, something Santer has been keen to emphasise to his colleagues in the Commission. To a certain extent, this quest for objectivity has improved the once less favourable view of the Unit.

As part of the Commission's structure, the Forward Studies Unit exists to inform Commission thinking on EU affairs. Consequently, its members liaise formally and informally with the appropriate Directorates of the Commission, presenting their ideas and aiming to impact upon agenda-setting and policy formulation processes. Given the long-term nature of its remit, its influence may or may not be realised until several years later. The Unit works closely with the Joint Research Centre, part of Directorate-General XII, which is dedicated to providing scientific and technical support to all areas of EU policy, and with other permanent Commission bodies such as the Competitiveness Advisory Group. To some extent the former could be viewed as another internal Commission think tank as it conducts research on scientific and technological issues. However, it acts more as a central channel of information within the Commission on these issues than as an advocate of specific policy perspectives.

Of course the Forward Studies Unit does not work in isolation, and there are many audiences outside the Commission with which it communicates both formally and informally. Interaction is crucial in gauging the climate of opinion and responding to this in carrying out the particular research. As well as working with colleagues within the Commission, members of the Forward Studies Unit are encouraged to liaise with other EU institutions, and representatives from the member state administrations. Moreover, part of its original remit was to establish relations with other research institutes in member states. This has primarily developed informally, although *Carrefours* or symposiums are held, at which the Forward Studies Unit can exchange ideas with other research institutes, government and political parties, business and interest groups. Interestingly, the Unit takes a very cautionary approach with the media, and seems not to be a chosen route for disseminating its research. Given the long-term philosophy of the Forward Studies Unit, it is felt that there is too great a potential for its ideas to be misinterpreted. Since 1997, the Forward Studies Unit has published some of its reports, however others still have restricted access. Evidently, there is a clear policy practised here, and arguably one can appreciate the motives for such a strategy. There is huge scope for ideas to be misrepresented by the media as concrete plans of the Commission, thus building upon already ill-informed and alarmist notions of the Commission's role in the integration process. Overall, the Forward Studies Unit primarily functions as a unit of the Commission, serving the specific purpose of generating ideas on European integration that should be considered in the formulation of EU policies. It does not have a direct public educative role, although it may influence the climate of opinion indirectly through its contacts with other think tanks, EU institutions, and national administrations. It certainly seems to have established its place within the Commission's structure, and would appear to be a significant actor in EU policy formulation processes.

### **Homes in Brussels**

The second level of EU think tank activity is that of the Brussels-based research organisation. Day refers to these within a wider category of international think tanks.<sup>16</sup> However, a greater degree of specificity can be employed as there are several bodies geared exclusively to EU issues, which are naturally located in Brussels. They have all emerged in the last two decades, and whilst their remits and activities vary, they have a definite presence as policy advocates within the EU.



The Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) was established in 1983, and is currently under the direction of Peter Ludlow. It professes to be entirely independent in its approach, and sees itself as the leading think tank in Brussels. It has a substantial permanent staff of approximately 40 persons, half of whom are researchers and in many cases former Eurocrats or established academics. The Belmont European Policy Centre revamped its image in 1996, and is now known as the European Policy Centre. Founded in 1990, it describes itself as a *pro-active policy think tank*, and has a broad EU remit. Like CEPS, the European Policy Centre is advised by a diverse group of business executives, former Eurocrats, Members of the European Parliament, national political actors, academics and journalists, with John Palmer, former European editor of *The Guardian*, its current Director.

On the surface, both examples of the exclusively EU-orientated think tank would appear to be generating fairly objective debate on European integration. CEPS has a strong reputation both within the Commission and national arenas for producing work of a high academic standard. Its presence within the EU is accentuated by a vibrant public profile in Brussels and throughout the EU member states (there is a CEPS International Network, with the Brussels office at the core). The European Policy Centre also has a large network of European and international contacts, including several links with other research institutes. Between 1993 and 1995 it was involved in a joint venture with the Progressive Policy Institute and the Aspen Institute in the United States examining global economy. CEPS is highly adept at organising high-level seminars and conferences, and disseminating research through its in-house publications. Its profile tends to be enhanced by the status of contributors to conferences who were or are often high-ranking EU and national officials. The extent to which these factors produce an influential think tank is arguable. Elements of its 1988 study on Economic and Monetary Union can be identified in the Delors' Report published a year later. However, claims that it is influencing the EU agenda can sometimes be exaggerated by its ability to attract the big names, and its strong business concerns.

What is most noticeable in both cases is the significance of the corporate sector in their structures and work programmes. Since its relaunch, the European Policy Centre places even greater emphasis on the business community as a key constituency. It states that it aims to influence government, business, and civil society, and carries out studies for all of these groups, organises fora and conferences, and publishes numerous reports. However, one aspect of its work that appears to predominate are the business briefings. Moreover, its membership is primarily corporate and in particular large multinationals, although representatives from regional and diplomatic arenas also subscribe. This suggests that its avowedly *pro-active* approach could be skewed in certain directions. It certainly seems that the European Policy Centre is aiming to generate a new identity for itself in Brussels by highlighting its services to the corporate sector. CEPS' funding is derived from individual and corporate membership fees, conference revenues, and research contracts. By far the most significant is the large corporate membership, and its promotional literature stresses the importance of this constituency.

The Philip Morris Institute (PMI) differs slightly from CEPS or the European Policy Centre, in as much as it has a clearer ideological perspective. It fits into the simplified definition of a think tank offered above in so much as it conducts research on a range of EU issues with the express aim of fostering greater public debate on European issues. Since its establishment in 1993, PMI has expanded its mailing distribution to over 13,000 individuals or institutions. Its Director, Giles Merritt oversees a nine member editorial board composed of a former Commissioner and fonctionnaires, former Permanent Representatives to Brussels, journalists, an official from the OECD, and the former Czech Minister for European Affairs. In this sense, one could see a variety of influences upon its ideological orientation. However, its mission statement explicitly refers to its existence as reflecting the desire of Philip Morris Companies Inc. "to make an important contribution to the European policy debate". Whilst its research is broadly based, often contracted out to other former EU and national politicians, academics and commentators, there is a slight but discernible orientation in its publications to issues pertinent to the company's interests.

A good example of a Brussels-based think tank with a broader European agenda is that of the European Institute for Research and Information on Peace and Security (GRIP). It is concerned with the role of Europe in international security issues, and has been located in Brussels since 1979. It has carried out studies for the European Commission and the European Parliament. However GRIP does have a specific sectoral concern, namely that of the defence economy, and whilst all of its publications stress its institutional independence from its sponsors, further research is needed to identify the extent of this research freedom.

### **National with a Euro-focus**

The third category of EU think tank is that of national bodies dealing with EU issues, either exclusively or as part of a wider policy agenda. Those set up explicitly to address the EU policy agenda include the Federal Trust - established in 1945 and one of the oldest exclusively European-focused think tanks - and the European Policy Forum in the UK, the Institute of European Affairs (IEA) in Ireland, and the European Institute of Public Administration (EIPA) located in Maastricht. Some parallel can be made between the IEA in Dublin and the CEPS in Brussels due to their large corporate memberships and projected image. By contrast, the EIPA, set up in 1981, is more directly linked with member state governments and EU institutions. It is financially supported by each of the member states and the European Commission. It is a non-profit organisation, but its funding does delineate its primary audience. Whilst its key role is to respond to EU or national requests for civil service training on the dynamics of EU policy-making, it has established itself as an important voice on EU issues, and its work has a public and academic constituency. The educative role of think tanks is also fulfilled by the Federal Trust and IEA who manage to disseminate their ideas widely through publications and conferences. They both advocate a positive view of the benefits of European integration, but also engage in critical thought on the efficacy of EU policy-making.

Other national think tanks explore EU issues as they pertain to their policy agenda. Those with currently strong Euro-interests include the Institute of Economic Affairs

and Demos in the UK, the German Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, the Austrian Institute of Economic Research, the Danish Institute of International Affairs, the Instituto de Estudos Estrategicos e Internacionais in Portugal, and the Spanish Institute of International Affairs and Foreign Policy. KAS, the Christian Democratic Union party related think tank has a designated second office in Brussels, which can be a significant organisational benefit for advocacy potential. Institutes of foreign or international affairs naturally include the EU as one level of their research orientation. Some have stronger Euro-sympathies than others: for example, Spinelli was the first director of the Italian Istituto Affari Internazionali and the pro-supranational ethos remains. A number of these national think tanks are also linked through pan-European structures. TEPSA (Trans European Policy Studies Association) is one of the best known, founded through the Federal Trust in 1974. It aims to promote collaborative research by linking affiliated national institutes from all fifteen EU member states, and associate members from Central and Eastern Europe and the College of Europe in Bruges.<sup>17</sup> Other transnational links include the European Strategy Group, the European Security Analysis Network, and those between NIIB in Clingendael, DGAP in Bonn, SWP in Munich, IFRI Paris, RIIA in London, and the WEU Institute for Security Studies in Paris. These formal linkages enable joint research ventures, but the extent to which they increase influence at supranational and national levels is difficult to ascertain.

The European Cultural Foundation (ECF) dates back to 1954 and its establishment symbolised the strong scholastic interest in the European idea. Its remit is wide-ranging, and is currently focused upon promoting cooperation with Central and East European states, as well as countries from the Mediterranean area. ECF receives its core funding through the Dutch lottery, and has carried out substantial research for the European Commission on the Socrates educational programme. In this respect, it has particular supranational and domestic constituencies. It also acts as a centre of a European network of associated institutes, although this is not as integrated as that of the Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP). The IEEP is a network of partner institutions, based in Paris, London, Berlin, Brussels, Arnhem, and Madrid. Each institution works separately to influence national environmental policy actors, but they combine forces at the Brussels interface. Therefore, the IEEP could be included in both the second and third levels of think tank activity due to its national and transnational characteristics. It was established in 1976 as part of the ECF to promote the development of environmental policies within Europe, not exclusively EU but obviously the emphasis has shifted as EU competences have developed in this area. It offers consultancy services and is regularly approached by the Commission, but is a non-profit organisation. Due to its networked approach, the IEEP is able to disseminate its research outputs to both actors and institutions at the supranational and national levels. The extent to which it has played an advocacy role has often been raised due to the relative infancy of green issues. Its influence was certainly strong in the earlier years of its existence and can in part be attributed to slow greening of politics at national and EU levels. The dramatic rise in the salience of the environment permitted other actors such as interest groups (under the umbrella of the European Environmental Bureau) and political parties (in particular the Greens in the European Parliament) to exert influence upon the EU environmental agenda. Nevertheless, the IEEP remains an important research institute, working closely with

the Commission and increasingly with the European Parliament, and it has been recognised within the environmental policy community as an important influence upon final European Commission documents. The IEEP represents a good example of an epistemic community.<sup>18</sup> It operates as a network of research institutes who hold shared beliefs, and its members provide expertise on environmental issues.

Generally, an initial review of national think tanks indicates a growing trend to focus upon EU level issues, reflecting the increasing significance of EU policy upon national agendas. All the think tanks contacted placed considerable emphasis upon the recent and current development of their European research programmes. This pattern is particularly discerning in the UK, reflecting the growing political willingness to engage in this important debate although the ideological perspectives remain. Overall, the level of activity tends to conform with the political importance attached to EU issues at the national level, their growing significance, and the potential these research institutes have for advocacy in this sphere of public policy. However, it is not clear at this stage of research whether national institutes without transnational links are increasingly targeting EU institutions, or whether they prefer to concentrate their activities within national channels, focusing upon government, political parties and other domestic audiences.

### **Interest Group or Think Tank?**

The final category employed in this analysis of think tanks is that of EU interest groups who have developed think tank capacities. The distinction may be fine, but it is crucial in identifying the advocacy role of such groups. The long-awaited publication of the 'Directory of Interest Groups' by the European Commission could be seen in some small measure as a useful mechanism of drawing a distinction between a think tank and an interest group operating at the EU level.<sup>19</sup> The European Commission explicitly recognises 680 pan-European *non-profit* making interest organisations in this directory. These groups provide the European Commission with additional, often essential information and expertise on specific policy proposals. Given the ever-increasing and demanding task of policy initiation at the EU level, the European Commission has come to rely on interest groups as one source of valuable policy advice. However, this reliance can alter the European Commission's perception of interest groups and their members. Although their relationship is mutually dependent and mutually beneficial, there have been suggestions that sometimes the role of an interest group as a lobbyist is overshadowed by the need for policy advice.

There is certainly evidence to support the suggestion that some interest groups take on think tank capacities. One emerging trend is the establishment of research units within interest groups, such as within Greenpeace. Obviously, the motives for setting up such internal units is to provide the interest group with additional expertise. However, it may be that such units will begin to be perceived as independent sources of advice. A more definite example of interest groups seen as types of think tanks is the Ravenstein Group, formed as an elite dining club from various business interest groups operating at the EU level. Membership has been kept strictly confidential, perhaps suggesting that its participants do not wish to compromise their business

interests but are able to act as some form of idea generation. Greenwood feels that the European Round Table of Industrialists (ERT), and the Association for the Monetary Union of Europe (AMUE) also have these think tank capacities.<sup>20</sup> Part of his overall thesis is that EU level interest groups have the ability to operate as *idea forums* or think tanks at an informal level. As in the US, the distinction is allowed to become blurred due to the absence of robust political parties at the EU level. The transnational parties are perceived as weak due to the relative inferior position of the European Parliament to the European Commission and the Council of the EU. This is further symbolised by the priority afforded to the European Commission by interest groups and think tanks. Literature published by the latter tends to emphasise formal and informal contacts and workings with the European Commission: the European Parliament seems to be an afterthought, arguably due to its lack of policy-initiating power. Individual members from the European Parliament often contribute to, or associate themselves with these think tanks, but overall there is less reference to the European Parliament as a constituency compared with the Commission. Interest groups believe their efforts are best rewarded by focusing upon the Commission. Despite the growing importance of the European Parliament, the majority of contacts with parliamentarians are at the national level. This pleases some national parliaments, who perceive the European Parliament as a threat to their domestic legitimacy. Yet it simply accentuates the existing harsh divisions within the EU policy network.

As Greenwood argues, the vacuum in policy advocacy that these interest groups seem to partially fill also arises from the sheer variety of policy arenas. Each member state operates in arenas that do not directly or consistently correspond to those at the EU level. The need to adapt and transfer seems to have a detrimental effect upon member states' abilities to promote ideas and concepts effectively. An extremely effective lobby in the 1980s was that of the Kangaroo Group set up to promote the four founding principles of the EU, free movement of goods, services, persons and capital. It brought together an infamous group of people including former Heads of State and Commission Presidents, Eurocrats, as well as lobbyists and industrialists. It is generally accepted that the work of the Kangaroo Group influenced thinking at that time, and helped to spur on the momentum for relaunching the EC, and the resultant White Paper on 'Completion of the Internal Market' in 1985. Whilst founded as a lobby, the Kangaroo Group was able to fulfil an advocacy role, and identify a precise policy arena. Admittedly, the climate of opinion was shifting in favour of enhancing the internal market at this time, but the Kangaroo Group certainly had some influence upon the policy agenda. Significantly, whilst it is still actively promoting the efficient functioning of the internal market, and boasts a distribution list for its newsletter of 12,000, its profile has declined over the past few years rather in line with the relative completion of the internal market.

Therefore, the traditional distinction between interest group and think tank can become blurred when applied at the EU level. Further research needs to establish whether the European Commission's perception of interest groups shifts over time, and if individual members of such groups or the groups themselves become independent experts in the eyes of the European Commission.

## **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EURO THINK TANKS**

Think tanks certainly have a presence within EU policy-making processes. What needs to be ascertained is their relevance in generating ideas and providing policy expertise. This is fraught with methodological barriers. The availability of documentation and the subjective nature of claims of influence pose inherent problems. However, we have to decide whether think tanks matter at the European level. Further research needs to try and assess actual input. This can be done by case analyses of proposals within policy sectors. Obviously, without a comprehensive examination, findings will be specific to policy sectors and dependent upon the prevailing political climate of the time. However, such evaluations contribute to the assessment of the relevance of think tanks.

The growth of EU-orientated think tanks generally corresponds to the deepening of European integration and the widening of policy-making activity. Their activity tends to reflect the realities of EU policy-making and its impact upon domestic law, and the corresponding heightened awareness. The exclusively EU-orientated Brussels think tanks established themselves during the period in which member states agreed to relaunch the European project, complete the internal market and begin to re-examine the possibility of Economic and Monetary Union. Accordingly, think tanks based in member states also began to develop more coherent and high-profile EU research programmes. Clearly, these institutes felt that there was increased scope for influencing the EU policy agenda and responded to this. This could be seen as the primary explanation for the rise in think tank activity. The founding members may have had personal reasons for reacting in this way, could have been encouraged by policy elites within their domestic arena, or perhaps were mobilised by the increased demands faced by the Commission for policy expertise.

The extent of think tank activity is now considerable, and there are several common features to these research institutes. Differences do exist in relation to specific remits, structural and membership profiles, and ideological perspectives on European integration. However, this preliminary assessment identified some significant common characteristics of these think tanks. Whilst all of them have broad constituencies, the European Commission ranks high due to the reciprocal nature of the relationship. As the formal initiator of EU policy proposals, the Commission is a natural target for EU-orientated think tanks, yet it also seeks their input into agenda-setting and policy formulation. Think tanks can tap into the Commission by offering consultancy services or more indirectly and informally through networking and publications. The Commission on the other hand may directly ask one of these institutes to contribute to a particular debate. A further distinction needs to be made however between the need for advice and ideas balanced against a more overt political motive. The European Commission may be open to advocacy as legitimates its existence, makes a public affirmation of the transparent nature of EU policy-making, and generally enhances its image. Given the corresponding trend in increased think tank activity and the political pressures to legitimate the EU, such a dialogue is significant.

The corporate sector is also an important audience for these think tanks. Besides the business interests served by national research institutes, the mission of the exclusively

EU-orientated Brussels based think tanks is predominantly corporate. They appear to focus upon this constituency due to the necessity of funding, but also due to the primacy of business interests in the European project. Despite attempts to create a citizens Europe, the economic rationale for European integration still dominates, and the Brussels based think tanks seem to be reflecting this. There are also similarities in the actual policy entrepreneurs working within this form of think tank. Former and current Eurocrats, academics and journalists, and corporate representatives all feature on the executive committees, advisory boards, or lists of contributors. To this extent, one must ask whether these think tanks are simply an extension of the political elite within EU policy-making structures. Whilst CEPS activities and publications do perform a wider educative role, as do those of the EIPA, Federal Trust and IEA, their influence remains confined to the informed public.

This analysis has provided some perspectives on the development of EU-orientated think tank activity. What of the future for these research institutes? In such a competitive policy environment as the EU, it may also arise that only some of the larger, better structured and financed of these research bodies survive. Not only are they in a more secure position from an organisational perspective, but perhaps they gain preferential status within constituencies by their favourable economic and political positions, thus ensuring their survival. One of the most noticeable trends has been the growing EU research agenda within national based think tanks and to a large degree a natural reflection of the impact of EU policy-making.

The Brussels-based think tanks are few, and could be squeezed out by national research institutes who increasingly focus upon the European agenda. There have been mutterings in Brussels that the PMI is to be disbanded. This could either reflect a decline in the constituencies available to a Brussels-based think tank such as the PMI as a result of the national growth, or may be a structural and financial rationalisation on the part of Philip Morris. The European Policy Centre was forced to re-assess its activities, again perhaps as a consequence of the presence of longer-established national think tanks. CEPS remains in a strong position, and is unlikely to be threatened by this emerging trend. Yet, the potential remains. Domestic research institutes have a wider constituency, and although their relations with the European Commission are less developed, they do have the financial and organisational ability to quickly establish themselves as advocacy communities within the European Union.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank colleagues for their comments and suggestions, in particular Andrew Denham and Diane Stone.

<sup>2</sup>For the most recent discussion of definitional problems, see Diane Stone and Mark Garnett "Think tanks, policy advice and governance", in Diane Stone, Andrew Denham, and Mark Garnett (eds.) *Think Tanks Across Nations. A Comparative Approach* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp.1-20.

<sup>3</sup>William Wallace, "Ideas and Influence", in Stone, Denham and Garnett (eds.), op. cit., p.226.

<sup>4</sup>Andrew Denham and Mark Garnett *British think-tanks and the climate of opinion*, (London: UCL Press, 1998), pp.16-17.

<sup>5</sup>Guy Peters, "Agenda-setting in the European Community", *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 1, No.1 (1994) pp.9-26.

<sup>6</sup>Sonia Mazey and Jeremy Richardson, "The Command of the Lobby", in Geoffrey Edwards and David Spence, *The European Commission* (London: Cartermill, 1995), pp.169-201.

<sup>7</sup>Janne Haaland Matlary, "The Role of the Commission: A Theoretical Discussion", in Neill Nugent (ed.) *At the Heart of the Union: Studies of the European Commission* (London: Macmillan, 1997), p.273.

<sup>8</sup>Brigid Laffan, "From Policy Entrepreneur to Policy Manager. The Challenge facing the European Commission", *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol.4, No.3 (1997), pp.422-438.

<sup>9</sup>Sonia Mazey and Jeremy Richardson, "Transference of Power, Decision Rules and Rules of the Game", in Sonia Mazey and Jeremy Richardson, *Lobbying in the European Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.10.

<sup>10</sup>Commission of the European Communities, 'An Open and Structured Dialogue between the Commission and Special Interest Groups.' Brussels, SEC(92) 2272 final, 2 December 1992.

<sup>11</sup>See Charles Grant, *Delors. Inside the House that Jacques Built*, (London: Nicholas Brealey, 1994).

<sup>12</sup>Keith Middlemas, *Orchestrating Europe. The Informal Politics of the European Union 1973-1995*, (London: Fontana, 1995), p.568.

<sup>13</sup>Michelle Cini, *The European Commission*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p.188.

<sup>14</sup>George Ross, *Jacques Delors and European Integration*, (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), p.61.

<sup>15</sup>Grant, op. cit., p.91.

<sup>16</sup>Alan Day, "Think Tanks in Western Europe", in Jim McGann and Kent Weaver (eds.) *Think Tanks and Civil Societies: Catalysts for Action*, forthcoming 1999.

<sup>17</sup>Full members of TEPSA include the Austrian Institute of International Affairs, Group d'Etudes Politiques Europeennes in Brussels, Danish Institute of International Affairs, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Association Francaise d'Etudes pour l'Union Europeene in Paris, Institut für Europäische Politik in Bonn, the Greek Centre of European Studies and Research, the Institute of European Affairs Dublin, Instituto Affari Internazionali in Rome, Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Europeenes Robert Schuman in Luxembourg, Nederlands Instituut voor Internationale Betrekkingen (NIIB) Instituto de Estudos Estrategicos e Internacionais in Lisbon, Centro Espanol de



Relaciones Internacionales Madrid, the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, and the Federal Trust in London.

<sup>18</sup>Peter Haas, "Introduction: epistemic communities and international policy coordination", *International Organisation*, Vol.46, No.1 (1992), pp.1-35.

<sup>19</sup>European Commission, *Directory of Interest Groups*, (Luxembourg: Official Office for Publications of the European Community, 1996).

<sup>20</sup>Justin Greenwood, *Representing Interests in the European Union*, (London: Macmillan, 1997), p.128.