

Notre Europe

ETUDES & RECHERCHES

Seminar organised in Paris, December 13, 2004

---

## « *Think Tanks* in Europe and US: Converging or Diverging? »

---

With Dr. James McGANN, FPRI and Stephen BOUCHER

Report written by Morgan Lahrant and Stephen Boucher.

# Introduction

The publication in October 2004 of two studies of the US and EU think tank sectors, the former by Professor James McGann for FPRI<sup>1</sup> and the latter by Stephen Boucher for Notre Europe<sup>2</sup>, highlighted converging trends on both sides of the Atlantic. As stressed by the Chairman of Notre Europe, Pascal Lamy, and its General Secretary, Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul, the conference held by Notre Europe on December 13, 2004 was intended to expand on these recent studies by discussing the specificities of European vs. American think tanks.

In his introduction, Stephen Boucher mentioned that the European think tank sector is characterized by a large number of organizations and researchers, scattered across Member States. He also emphasized the strong constraints that the sector is facing, in particular the tension between academic credibility and funding, as well as the challenge to be heard by the media and decision-makers. He argued that the potential of European think tanks will not be fulfilled unless they successfully manage the tension between academic credibility on the one hand, and the need to communicate effectively and to gain access to decision-makers on the other hand, in a context of increased competition between think tanks.

## SHARED CHARACTERISTICS AND CHALLENGES

James McGann, who has published extensively and worked himself twice for US think tanks, is a world expert on the issue. Based on his own experience and a recent survey conducted in 20 European countries, he identifies three types of think tanks: "policy research organization", which focus exclusively on fundamental research; "think-and-do tanks" which also provide policy analysis and policy recommendations; and "engagement" (rather than advocacy) tanks that focus on issues and the "doing part". "Some think tanks integrate all three aspects, others only one or two."

Within this context, think tanks have four major functions:

- They conduct long and short term research
- They produce both books or short-term action-oriented material

---

<sup>1</sup> "Scholars, Dollars and Policy Advice", [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org)

<sup>2</sup> Boucher, Stephen *et alia*, "Europe and its Think Tanks, a promise to be fulfilled", *Notre Europe*, Paris, October 2004

- They engage public opinion, policy-makers, and the media
- They provide government with a steady stream of personnel

They also face four common challenges:

- They require a diversified base of financial support
- They need to recruit and retain “smart and media-savvy” people able to think well and communicate to the media, a “rare commodity”
- They need to produce truly innovative ideas that challenge the status quo and provide solutions
- They need to understand how to influence and shape public policies

To meet these challenges, it is of critical importance for all think tanks to understand : who their audience is; what their product is; what constitutes success for them and how to evaluate their impact.

#### WHY EUROPEAN THINK TANKS ARE BEHIND

Based on this typology, Professor McGann compares European and American think tanks as follows:

European Think Tanks	American Think Tanks
EU think tanks have much smaller budgets and staff	US think tanks have become influential actors in the decision-making process with large teams and budgets
They are more directly affiliated with politicians and political parties; there is much more of a policy-elite focus	They work more at a distance from political parties
They are less visible and there is almost no “revolving door”	They provide direct advice to the administration, and to Congress through hearings; they act as “holding tanks”
They tend to have a more long-term, “big policy” perspective	Short term analysis, with special emphasis on economic and foreign affairs issues
Those of the “Left” are relatively more common	There is an increasing number of influential think tanks on the right
Institutional philanthropy is less developed, they depend more on public funding, but the situation is gradually changing	There is a relative abundance of private donors
More academic and national in their orientation	More national and state-oriented
Less visibility	Important visibility in the media
There is not an appropriate level of accountability and financial transparency	High level of public transparency and accountability

European think tanks dealing with EU issues follow the general pattern and amplify it: they are too national-oriented, they have limited influence on citizens, they remain under-funded, under-staffed, under-developed and under-valued by institutions, and are not policy-oriented enough.

James McGann invited European think tank to get out of the trap of dependency towards public funding and to regain their independence. This challenge is particularly important in the European case since the process of European integration and the constitution of a European *demos* require the emergence of pan-European think tanks. In this regard, international NGOs could constitute a source of inspiration, most notably because of their ability to communicate through the media. NGOs have become "smaller, nimbler, and more effective."

### **GREATER ACCOUNTABILITY AND BETTER COMMUNICATION**

In the Q&A session, Professor McGann stressed the importance of financial transparency and effective relations with the media. He argued that European organisations should develop a similar degree of transparency as their American counterparts. All is not perfect in the USA either though, as American foundations tend "to micro-manage think tanks through very specific criteria for very small projects" and to require that the results of the research conducted appear in the media. This reduces think tanks' ability to produce innovative ideas. Diversified funding is therefore essential to guarantee think tanks' independence. Concerning the second aspect, Prof. McGann praised the ability of American think tanks to gain access to the media. Through interactive Internet pages and direct access to public shows, the 25 most important think tanks can directly shape public opinion. However, the negative side of this is that the media impose a rhythm and a style of functioning, which may hinder American think tanks' ability to produce prospective and innovative policies. He argues that the same phenomenon could threaten European think tanks.

Stephen Boucher made reference to the newly created think tank chaired by French economist Jean Pisani-Ferry as an example of a successful and independent pan-European study center in an area that was so far not covered at the EU level. This demonstrates, he argued, that there is room for new think tanks in Europe, both very specialized independent research centres and more generalist organizations. He finally argued that there are significant structural differences between the USA and Europe which explain the relative under-development of EU think tanks, in particular the fact that European think tanks compete with other providers of policy ideas, such as governmental study units or research departments of political parties, which are less developed in the United States.

Study available in French and English on our Website : <http://www.notre-europe.asso.fr>

© Notre Europe, January 2005.

This publication benefits from the financial support of the European Commission. Nevertheless its content is the sole responsibility of the author. Neither the European Commission nor *Notre Europe* is to be held responsible for the manner in which the information in this text may be used.

This may be reproduced if the source is cited.