

A Major Leftwing Think Tank In Aotearoa

Call To Action Or Impossible Dream?

- Sue Bradford

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I was much taken with Brian Easton's article "Rogernomics And The Left" in *Foreign Control Watchdog* 129 (April 2012, <http://www.converge.org.nz/watchdog/29/10.htm>). Among other things, Brian contrasts the power and influence which the business community and its think tanks have exerted on Governments in this country with the scarcity of institutions capable of fostering debate and policy renewal on the Left side of the political spectrum. The lack of any substantial Leftwing think tank in Aotearoa is something which has nagged at me since around 1990 when I first recall conversations with friends and colleagues lamenting the absence of any organisation with the wherewithal to counter the influence the New Zealand Business Round Table (NZBRT) was then having on successive Labour and National governments.

In later years I felt the gap again, when as a Green MP in the 2000s I saw firsthand the extensive influence the Maxim Institute exerted over Parliamentary, media and public discourse on legislation, particularly in relation to controversial social issues such as the Prostitution Reform Bill and my own Member's Bill amending s59 of the Crimes Act (*which came to be popularly labelled as the Anti-Smacking Bill. Ed.*). After I quit Parliament in October 2009 I realised, in a somewhat post-traumatic kind of way, that this was a good opportunity to take stock, both personally and politically, in terms of looking at what I did next. While the economic imperative suggested I get out and attempt to secure a reasonably well paid job as quickly as possible, this was countered by the thought that at last here was a rare opportunity in my headlong activist life to take a step back and attempt some deeper research and writing for a change.

The issue which was very much on my mind back then, after ten years in Parliament, was the lack of genuine depth and vision in policy development on the Left – and overall, the absence of time and space for us to simply 'think' together – to debate, discuss and even dissent from each other in the way Brian talks about in his article. This reflection then led me in a natural progression back to my earlier questioning about why we don't have a major Leftwing think tank in New Zealand anyway, and what it might take to set one up.

I approached Professor Marilyn Waring at the Auckland University of Technology's Institute of Public Policy to see if she would be willing to take a Parliamentary refugee under her wing as a doctoral candidate. Much to my delight, she provided total backing for my proposed PhD as primary supervisor and helped me negotiate my somewhat tenuous way back into the academic world which I'd left some decades earlier. So here I am, several years later, half way through a PhD which considers the key question: "A major Leftwing think tank in Aotearoa - an impossible dream or a call to action?"

When Murray Horton invited me to contribute an article to *Watchdog*, I suddenly realised that this was an opportunity to let people on the Left in Aotearoa – and elsewhere - know what I was up to, and to invite feedback and comment from anyone who might have an interest in this question. Some information about my thesis project follows, and my contact email address is available at the end of this article – please feel free to get in touch.

Defining "Left"

It quickly became apparent that one of the first things I needed to do if I was to pursue this topic in any meaningful way was to identify a working definition of “Left” that others as well as myself might consider relevant and useful in Aotearoa in 2012. If I was going to talk about a “Leftwing think tank”, what in fact did I mean by “Left”? After a considerable amount of reading and pondering, and chasing down many interesting and time consuming byways, I came up with this preliminary definition:

Left: a commitment to working for a world based on values of fairness, inclusion, participatory democracy, solidarity and equality, and to transforming Aotearoa into a society grounded in economic, social, environmental and Tiriti justice. I am well aware that any definition, including this one, will be open to almost infinite critique, but I needed something that I could use as a starting point. In the interviews which I am carrying out for this research, I am asking participants to feel free to amend this definition and/or offer their own if they wish.

I am also conscious that this definition won't be setting radical hearts on fire, but it has been formed for academic rather than inspirational purposes. In terms of a shorthand way of identifying what I mean by “Left”, another means of cutting it is to clarify that for this research project I am defining “Left” as anyone who identifies themselves as such, and who is at any place on the Left spectrum from Labour, Green and Mana Left, through to the farther shores of extra-Parliamentary Left social democracy, socialism, eco-socialism, socialist feminism, Communism, anarcho-syndicalism (and varieties thereof).

Defining “Think Tank”

The second key term I had to grapple with in embarking on this study was, of course, the concept of “think tank”. There is a huge international academic literature on think tanks, and even a think tank specialising in the study of think tanks, the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania. While the term was first used by the United States during the Second World War to describe secure locations where military personnel and civilians could work on war strategies together ([McGann & Sabatini, 2011](#)), in fact histories often include mentions of organisations whose antecedents substantially predate this. For example, one writer reckons that the first think tank was in fact the Society for the Abolition of the African Slave Trade, set up by Thomas Clarkson in England in 1782 ([Goodman, 2005](#)), while another suggests that the Fabian Society, established in England in 1884, was an early example ([Stone, 1996](#)).

There are many different types of think tank, from very local through to transnational, and expressing perspectives from every different part of the political spectrum. Worldwide there has been an exponential growth in their number over the last few decades, and by one recent account there are now over 6,000 think tanks in 169 countries ([McGann & Sabatini, 2011](#)). Defining ‘think tank’ proved to be almost as difficult as attempting to define “Left”. Both are ever-shifting terms, with definitions as various as there are academics to make the definition. In the end I came up with this:

Think tank: a community based not for profit organisation which undertakes detailed research and policy development in order to influence and enhance public policy formation across a broad range of issues, through publications, media work, lobbying, conferences, workshops and other forms of advocacy and education. This is highly arbitrary, excluding many types of think tank which would fall into a broader standard definition, for example, policy institutes wholly or mainly funded by governments or religious networks or institutions, those based entirely within universities, and transnational think tanks. I decided to keep these out of scope for my research because (a) I believe it is highly unlikely that any New Zealand government in the foreseeable future will substantially fund a Leftwing think tank (although I'd love to be proved wrong); (b) I wanted to limit the scope to the possibility of setting up a Left think tank in this country, rather than aim to be trans national in the first instance; and (c) I sought to focus my study on the potential or otherwise to develop a think tank from a community sector base, rather than from or within a religious institution or university. This is not to preclude the possibility that any new entity might have some association – including funding and/or contracting arrangements – with academic, church, governmental or other bodies.

Leftwing Think Tanks Internationally

It will come as little surprise to readers of *Watchdog* that internationally there are far more think tanks on the Right of the political spectrum than there are on the Left, wielding substantially more influence than their progressive counterparts ([Hart & Vromen, 2008](#); [Hassan, 2008](#); [Rich, 2004](#)). The Heritage Foundation is one of the best known of the influential US Rightwing think tanks, and has even spread its influence directly into Aotearoa in recent times, where it has provided at least \$84,000 to fund the New Zealand Climate Science Coalition, a lobby group which has worked hard to deny the existence of human induced climate change ([Davison, 2012](#); [Renowden, 2012](#)).

And as I pointed out in an earlier article for *Watchdog* on welfare reform (*Watchdog* 125, December 2010, "Alert On Welfare Reforms: TNC Agenda Lurks Here, Too" <http://www.converge.org.nz/watchdog/25/07.htm>), Rightwing think tanks internationally, and particularly in the US, have deliberately and effectively driven a conservative welfare agenda for decades, impacting heavily on countries including the US, the UK, Australia and New Zealand. Again, it will come as no surprise to readers to learn that a range of studies also demonstrate that, internationally, think tanks of the Right and Centre attract a relatively high level of funding compared to those on the Left, and that conservative funding tends to have fewer strings attached in terms of constraining the scope of a think tank's activities.

Conditions for the development of Leftwing think tanks differ hugely from country to country. To give just one notable example at the positive end of things, in Germany the Government funds major think tanks for each political party in the Bundestag as part of its post-war commitment to nourishing democracy. The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation based in Berlin is the think tank attached to Die Linke (The Left), employing over 100 staff. Its main project is currently focused on "...working towards strategising Left politics and democratic-socialistic transformation of the current capitalistic society." ([Foundation, 2012](#)). This is certainly a very different situation than the experience of Left think tanks in most other jurisdictions, where they exist at all.

As part of my research, I plan to describe a sample of six Leftwing think tanks based in four countries comparable to New Zealand in order to provide current comparisons with what has and hasn't been happening here, and to offer information and insights for any new initiatives which may eventuate in this country. These six groups are the Centre for Policy Development and the Search Foundation (Australia), Canada Without Poverty and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (Canada), the Green House Think Tank (England), and the Jimmy Reid Foundation (Scotland).

I have chosen these organisations from a much wider pool of international Left think tanks because they represent a reasonably diverse sample in terms of size, age, ideology, structure and location, and because they are situated in countries with which we share a common language and similar political traditions. There are many Left think tanks in the United States, but I have excluded consideration of American examples, interesting though that would have been, because the philanthropic environment for progressive institutions and for think tanks generally is so much more benign there than in countries like Australia and New Zealand.

Think Tanks In New Zealand

Despite the steep rise in the number of think tanks around the world, especially from the 1970s onwards, New Zealand was a relative latecomer. Its first major think tank, the NZBRT, started life as a group of company chief executives who adopted the name "Roundtable" around 1980, before establishing a permanent office in 1986 ([Kerr, 1990](#)). Other think tanks on the Right and Centre of the political spectrum have also been established including the New Zealand Institute, the Ecologic Foundation, the Institute of Policy Studies, the Centre for Strategic Studies, the Sustainable Future Institute and the Maxim Institute. Of these, the Maxim Institute with its focus on family and social issues from a conservative perspective, and the New Zealand Institute, which arose out of the Knowledge Wave conferences of 2001 and 2003, have achieved substantial media and public prominence, alongside the NZBRT.

Shortly after the death of Roger Kerr in October 2011 after 25 years as Executive Director of the NZBRT, the NZBRT and the New Zealand Institute announced their intention to merge into one organisation in April 2012. This they have done, under the name "New Zealand Initiative", with Roger Partridge (formerly NZBRT) and Tony Carter (formerly NZI) as Co-Chairs, and German-born

economist Dr Oliver Hartwich as Executive Director. The New Zealand Initiative's mission is, in its own words, "...to promote a prosperous, free and fair society with a competitive, open and dynamic economy." ([Initiative, 2012](#)). Among other things, Dr Hartwich has been a Research Fellow at the Centre for Independent Studies in Sydney, and chief executive of the Policy Exchange in the UK, both renowned Rightwing think tanks.

While there has been a small amount of published comment about the lack of think tank activity generally in New Zealand ([Crothers, 2008](#); [B. Easton, 2003](#)) and about the absence of any major Leftwing think tank ([Choat, 2010](#); [Edwards, 2009](#)) there has been no research into why no Leftwing equivalent of the Right and Centre think tanks exists in New Zealand, what people on the Left think about the very concept of "think tank", or into what it might take to establish such an entity. As far back as 1995 Jane Kelsey wrote about the need to avoid anti-intellectualism, develop "well-resourced critical think-tanks", and that "uncoordinated research by isolated critics can never compete" ([Kelsey, 1995, p. 374](#)).

I come to my own research project in 2012 with an instinctive sense that what Jane was saying nearly two decades ago is even more relevant now than it was then. The twin ecological and economic crises and the ever greater power of transnational capital and its institutions over our lives are issues which confront us daily. Like Jane in 1995, I believe that without our own institutions on the Left which have the intellectual, research and advocacy firepower to begin to counteract the forces arrayed against us, we on the Left are always going to be very much on the back foot. However, I make no assumptions about what others on the Left might think. One of the main things I am keen to uncover through this research is whether others besides myself and a few friends think the idea of a Leftwing think tank(s) is a sound one, or not. I am well aware that there may well be a general sense among Leftwing academics and activists that such an enterprise(s) is neither desirable, nor possible. The answer to this is a major part of what I am keen to find out.

"Nascent" Left Think Tanks – Community Sector Organisations Which Carry Out Some Of The Functions Of Think Tanks

Early on in my research, I came to realise that while no major Leftwing think tank has developed in New Zealand during the timeframe of my study (1990 – 2012), in fact there have been and continue to be a number of community based organisations, networks and initiatives which have undertaken – and, in some cases, continue to carry out - some of the functions of a think tank. I believe there is much that can be learned from their experiences, and that the seeds of a future successful Left think tank (or tanks) may well lie in what is revealed through their stories. I have chosen to term these organisations and projects "nascent" Left think tanks for the purposes of this research, and I plan to describe the history and functions of eight of these, with detailed case studies of two in particular, as part of my study.

The sample I have chosen includes the Alternative Welfare Working Group (2010), the Auckland Unemployed Workers Rights Centre (AUWRC, 1983-1999), the Bruce Jesson Foundation (2000-present), *Watchdog's* very own Campaign against Foreign Control of Aotearoa (1974-present), the Child Poverty Action Group (1994-present), the Fabian Society (2010-present), the Jobs Research Trust (1994-2006) and Kotare Research and Education for Social Change in Aotearoa Trust (1999-present).

I selected these eight organisations from a substantially longer list, having felt the need to confine the number under investigation to a manageable quantity. The reasons for including these particular groups include that they are or were community based and not for profit; have some or all of the characteristics of a "think tank" as per my preliminary definition; that they clearly operate(d) within some aspect of my working definition of "Left", and that they represent a variety of Left ideological positionings and priorities. The two organisations which I will examine in a more detailed way are the think tank-like aspects of the work of AUWRC and the Kotare Trust.

Design Of The Study

My research does not pretend to be unbiased or objective, but is that of an insider studying the world from which I come – the Left in Aotearoa, in which I have been politically active since 1967. As I go into this research, I genuinely do not know or assume any particular answer to the question I am asking: A major Leftwing think tank in Aotearoa—an impossible dream or a call to action? Uncovering an answer—or a range of answers—is what I intend to explore, to more specific questions like: What do people on the Left think of the idea of a major Leftwing think tank – a good idea or not? Why hasn't one developed so far? If it is a good idea, what would it take to set one up? Where would resourcing come from? What role should or could such an entity (or entities) take in relation to te ao Maori and the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi?... And so on.

In terms of research methods, I am planning to carry out semi-structured interviews with up to 50 Left wing academics and activists from around New Zealand, some of whom will have had involvement with one or more of the eight nascent Left think tanks I identified earlier. This is actually quite a high number of participants for this type of research, but already I am concerned that there are many more people with whom I would like to talk – and who may be interested in talking to me – than the number I am able to interview directly within the methodological framework of this study. In this vein, and as mentioned above, I welcome any comment or queries you might have upon reading this article.

As well as the interviews, I will also be analysing documents from a number of sources, including material from and about the six international Left think tanks and the eight local nascent Leftwing think tanks. In the final phase of my research, and once it is complete, I will also look for opportunities to share or workshop my research findings with any group or network which has a particular interest. My full thesis will be available for free online via Scholarly Commons (<http://aut.ac.nz.libguides.com/content.php?pid=241787&sid=2255833>) once it's done, and I intend to produce a short report to be published as well. I will also welcome further opportunities to write about my research findings as they unfold.

Why Am I Doing This Research?

I started discussing my reasons for undertaking this project early on in this article, but to expand and summarise:

1. There is no existing substantive research on the question of a Leftwing think tank in Aotearoa, and I believe that the work I am doing will start to fill a gap which has long been noted by some Left academics and activists.
2. There is no major Leftwing think tank in existence in New Zealand. My hope is that the process of the research itself, and its findings, may assist in leading to the establishment of such an organisation – or organisations.
3. There is very little academic literature in New Zealand relating to think tanks despite a wide ranging literature internationally, so this research will be a small contribution towards filling this gap. However, it is probably worth noting that my focus is very much on the concept of a Leftwing think tank and related issues. Apart from contextualising, this study is not aimed at providing a work on the history and influence of Right and Centre think tanks in Aotearoa.
4. The presentation of a small selection of case studies of international Left think tanks based in comparable jurisdictions may well be helpful to anyone considering establishing a Leftwing think tank in Aotearoa, in providing some examples of what other have achieved, and how.
5. I hope that this research will provide an insight into the history, roles and influence of the community based organisations which I have identified as “nascent” Left think tanks, especially through the two more detailed case studies, adding to the growing literature about and from the community and voluntary sector in New Zealand.
6. As a by-product of the core thesis question, my expectation is that this study will assist in generating insights into how the Left in Aotearoa sees itself at a given historical moment – the second half of 2012; and through this, make a small but possibly significant contribution to the historical and political record of the New Zealand Left's perception of itself.

Some key events have happened over the past year, for example the Occupy experience, the rise of the Mana political party, the development of a consciously “eco-socialist” strand in New Zealand Left thinking, and a revival of extra-Parliamentary street activism in the face of a highly reactionary second

term National government. It seems an opportune time to take some soundings on how people view current and recent developments, and the key strategic tasks which lie ahead.

Brian Easton's recent *Watchdog* article concludes with a challenge:

"The likelihood is that the Key government will be too timid to address the evolving issues facing New Zealand including big ones like globalisation, social inequality and the environment as well as a myriad of smaller issues. The danger remains that there may be a repeat of Muldoon's legacy in which a future Government of the Left has to introduce major radical modernisation to resolve its predecessor's failures to respond to change, while handicapped by the limitations that these failures cause. Will the incoming Government be as bereft of analysis and vision as the Left was after Muldoon? Last time the consequence was Rogernomics" (*Watchdog* 129, April 2012, <http://www.converge.org.nz/watchdog/29/10.htm>).

Is This All That We Can Expect?

A rerun of the 1980s, for those of us old enough to remember, when the party that was supposed to represent the aspirations of ordinary people sold us and our country out to the highest bidders, in part because the Left of the Labour caucus was so dim on economics and so unwilling to stand up to persuasive ideologues that their very ideological core was stolen out from under them. And the addition of the new-generation Greens to the mix will not necessarily improve our prospects, at least from the perspective of those of us who believe that we need to go beyond the greening of capitalism to achieve truly transformative and successful economic, social, ecological and Tiriti justice.

I continue to hold a small flame of hope that we just may be able to find ways in which Left social democrats, socialists, eco-socialists and anarchists can build organisation(s) that will allow us to develop the intellectual, research and advocacy depth we need to take on a brutal economic system – and maybe start winning one day. Such organisations can and will take many forms, but I reckon one of them is that of "think tank".

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