

Think Tanks as Research Mediators



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What are Think Tanks?

- The term 'think tank' was once used to describe 'a secure room where plans and strategies could be discussed' in World War II (Denham and Garnett, 2004).
- No agreed definition of 'think tank' in more recent times (Denham and Garnett 2004; Abelson 2002).
- They have been termed 'universities without students', 'contract research organisations' and 'advocacy tanks' (Weaver 1989:563).

Think Tanks as 'Bridges' and Mediators, Linking Research and Policy

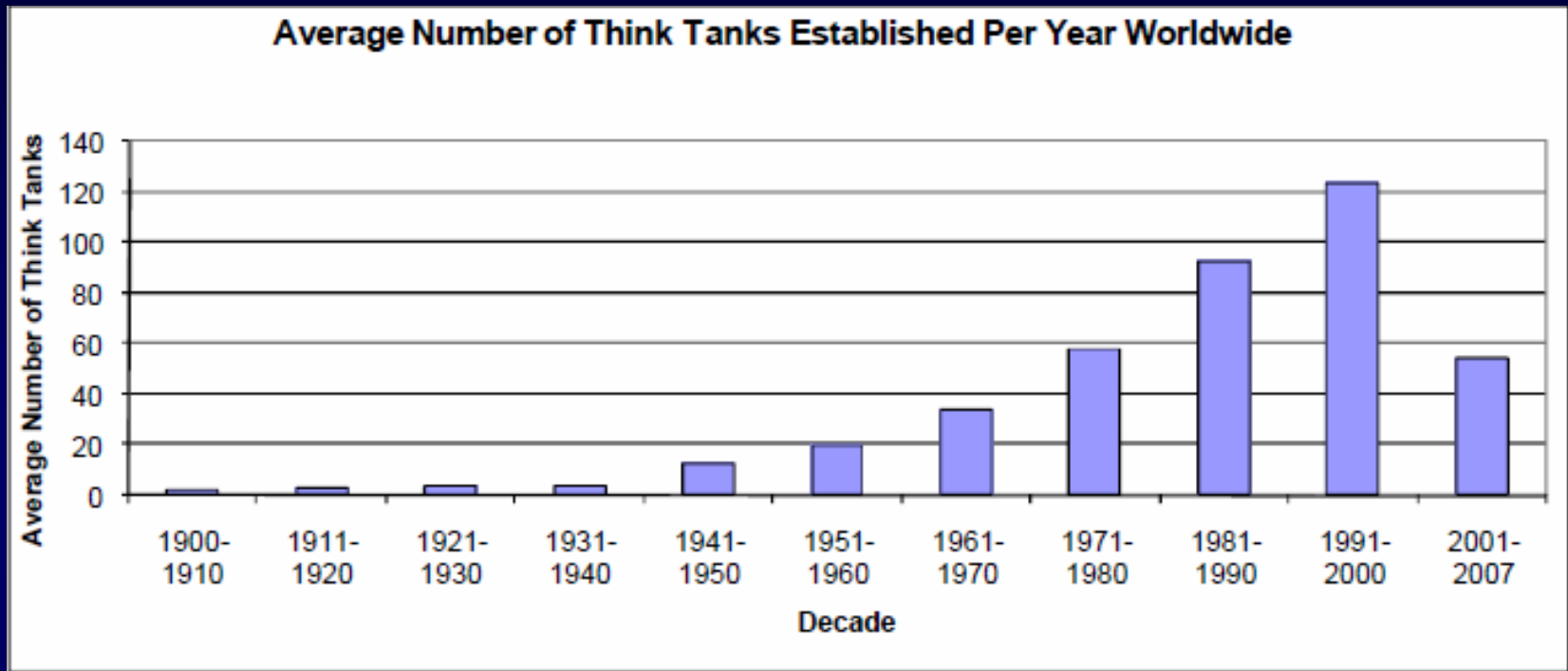
'Think tanks: organizations engaged on a regular basis in research and advocacy on any matter related to public policy. They are the bridge between knowledge and power in modern democracies.' (United Nations Development Programme, 2003: 6)

One of my interviewees (based in a Health QUANGO): 'That's where... think tanks grew up in the... well, really in the nineties... to be the... translators, if you like, or the bridge between the academics and policymakers' (Smith, 2008)

What do we know about the role of think tanks in policymaking?

- ‘[L]ittle research had been conducted on think tanks and their role in the policy making process’ (Peschek 1987).
- In the 24 years since this study, a great deal of research has been conducted on think tanks, particularly in the US, but research has remained limited in the UK and EU (e.g. Sherrington, 2000).
- Concerns have been raised about the ideological, political and corporate influences on think tanks (e.g. Day, 2000; Denham and Garnett, 2004; Ladi, 2005; Monbiot, 2011) but they usually present themselves as scientific establishments, composed of experts and scholars (Stone 2007).

The growth of think tanks:



Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2007

- 'Two thirds of all the think tanks that exist today were established after 1970 and over half were established since 1980. [...] Today there are more than 4,000 think tanks around the world,' (Start & Hovland, 2004)
- The UK has the second largest number of think tanks (after the USA) (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2007).

The Policy Influence of Think Tanks

Alex Stevens' (2011) ethnographic study of policymakers in the UK Home Office coded the types of 'evidence' that were most commonly used/referred to:

1. internally collected government data
2. **reports by think tanks** (e.g. IPPR, Demos, Policy Exchange, Centre for Social Justice, etc.)
3. opinion polls
4. reports from management consultancies.
5. previous policy papers
6. independent inquiries
7. reports of the inspectorates of police and prisons
8. internal evaluations
9. external evaluations
10. reports from abroad
11. press reports
12. externally produced academic analysis
13. television programmes (e.g. *The Wire*)
14. personal or reported experience
15. personal or reported opinion

Can academics learn from / work with think tanks to improve the dissemination of research-informed ideas?

Case Study 1: Think tanks and health inequalities under New Labour (1997-2010)

Policy approaches to health inequalities in the UK

TIME LINE:

The extent to which health inequalities remain in the UK (despite the NHS) begins to emerge. Researchers begin to consider why

Health inequalities begin to be viewed as a policy problem. In 1980 the Black Report is published. Conservative govt ignores issue but pressure from researchers and Labour (in opposition) increases

Labour are elected in 1997 on a manifesto which includes a clear commitment to reducing health inequalities and to basing policies on evidence of 'what works'. Acheson Report reviews evidence & makes recommendations.

A National Audit Office Report reveals health inequalities have not reduced. A new govt commissioned report is published (Marmot Review). Labour are defeated in the elections & a Con-Lib Dem coalition succeed. Unclear what future for health inequalities policy will be...

1950s-1970s

1979-1997

1997-2010

2010+

Think tanks may have helped get health inequalities on to the policy agenda

Academic who had worked in a think tank: 'The issue between... the mid-1980s and mid-1990s was getting the inequalities issue on the agenda, getting media attention, trying to kind of just force inequalities up the agenda. And I think that's what... think tanks and advocacy groups and people like this do best - they kind of get issues on the agenda, they get them to the forefront of people's minds, they provide critiques, they provide alternative perspectives. If the government of the day buys your general diagnosis of the problem - it says, 'yep, fine, we buy health inequalities,' the media loses a lot of interest so, you know...'

But what was their role once health inequalities were on the policy agenda?

Academic: 'For some reason, the think tanks are not getting into it [health inequalities]. I don't know why not, actually. [...] We've... got DEMOS and IPPR and all the rest of it. Very interesting... organizations but none of them... I mean I've vaguely tried to get them interested in health inequality actually and [Blank], who does the PR for [a research group] was constantly bombarding them with things, and I think they used to come to the odd meeting but they never engaged with us. So, for whatever reason, they've decided it's not something to really get into.'

Think tank director: 'In terms of think tanks... I think they've scored less well, really, on health issues than on some other issues. I think tanks have done better round labour market, welfare reform, education, even environment [...] than they have on health, actually. I mean there's been lots round health service reconfiguration but I'd be struggling to think of... who's really leading the charge in England on public health improvement. There may – I'm sure there are a lot of really good people doing a lot of really good work but... getting it taken seriously is [...] harder to identify.'

Why were think tanks apparently uninterested in health inequalities?

- Because policymakers weren't as interested?
Academic and policy advisor: 'It's a two-way process, right? [...] It's often that they [think tanks] are picking up runes of what the current debates are inside government and get on the bandwagon, do you know what I mean? They kind of know that child care's rising up the agenda because the issue is starting to be mentioned in various places so they sort of, you know, get on to it, rather than being the initial initiator...'
- Should academics become similarly responsive to policy needs? Fits the growing number of calls for 'sustained interaction' between researchers and policymakers (Saunders, 2005), including the 'co-production' of research (Lavis et al, 2005; Pope et al., 2006).

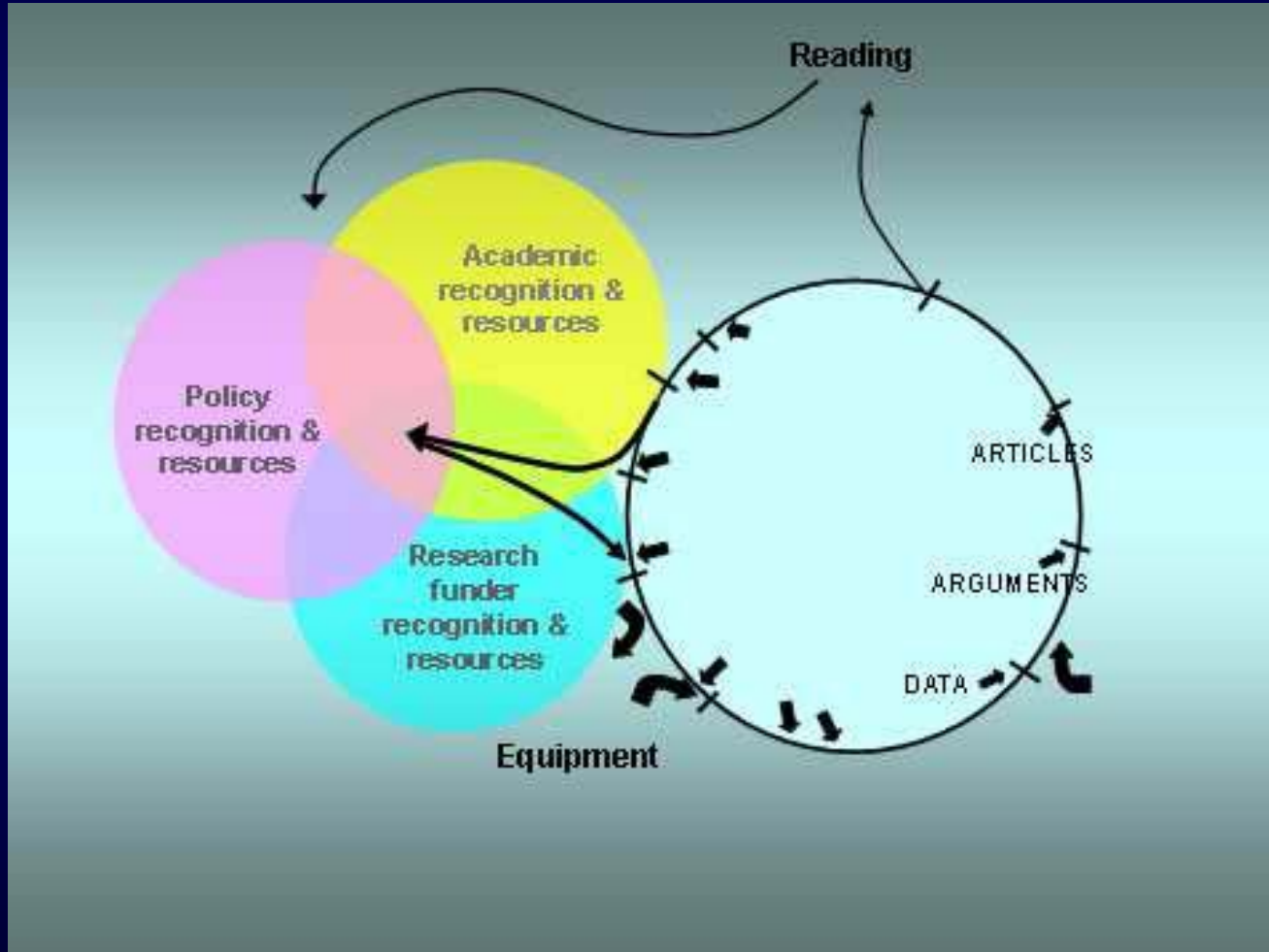
Researchers are already influenced by policy via funding opportunities:

Senior academic: *'You get questions, in a purely scientific sense, you get questions that you want to pursue. So what do you do? You hang it on, one way or another, you hang it as some issue that you think will get it funded.'*

Senior academic: *'Researchers write applications in terms of what people want to hear rather than... what is... the most... important and valuable thing they can do.'*

Senior academic: *'I think one of the difficulties is often when there are bids for research funding, it's almost if the findings or, you know, the messages that are required are stated from the start almost. [...] When one looks at research bids, it's, there are strong steers in terms of what they're looking for, what kinds of conclusions one's being steered towards, what kinds of policy messages they want...'*

The factors shaping/enabling academic research



A (slightly) revised version of Latour and Woolgar's (1986) 'Cycle of credit' (Smith, 2008).

An example of the influence of policy on academic research

Senior academic: *'When I was at [Blank] I could have been much more... critical. It isn't simply that I feel the funding source wouldn't like me to say those things, I actually... would feel it would be a betrayal of the trust that the people who gave me the opportunity to spend my time doing that had in me... and I think, in a way, when I was working at [this organisation] and they are actually funded through [government department], I think... they would have looked at me and said, 'how can you not have read what is appropriate to say?' So I think the censoring is actually self-imposed. [...] It isn't that I think they would come the heavy on me, it's... there's an unwritten understanding that I won't rock the boat when I'm writing in that guise. So... at an academic event, I feel I'm me, you know [...] I can be much more pointed in the points I want to make... but... I think when I'm writing through a funding source, which is government... and I do out of, and maybe I shouldn't, I do it out of a sense of loyalty to... the people who are trusting me not to say things that would make them feel uncomfortable... and cast into doubt the judgement that they had in saying I was the right person to do the job.'*

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Case Study 2: The tobacco industry's use of think tanks

Why are think tanks useful for tobacco companies?

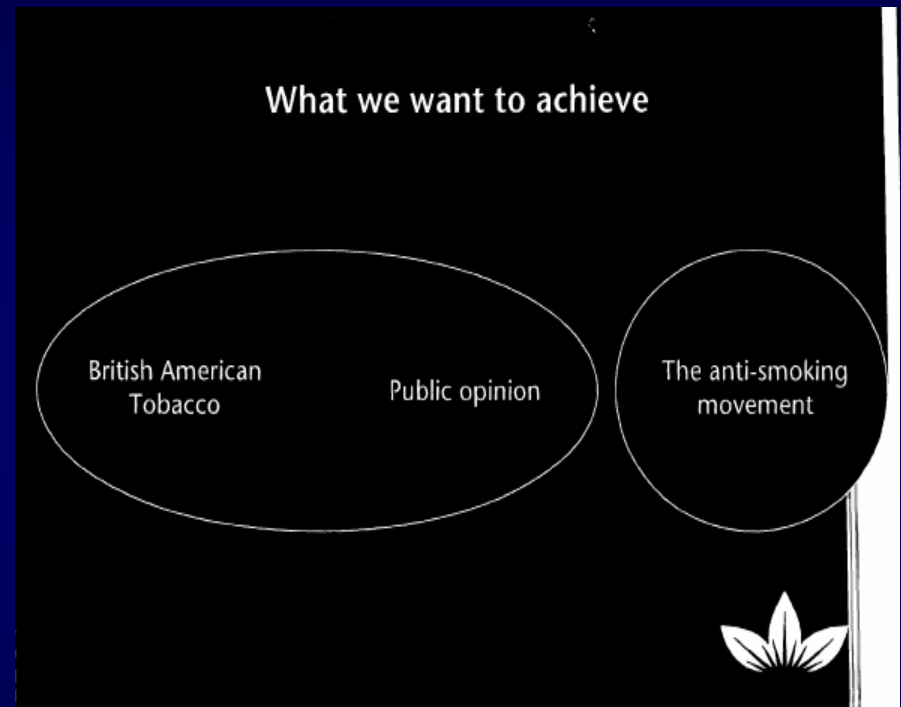
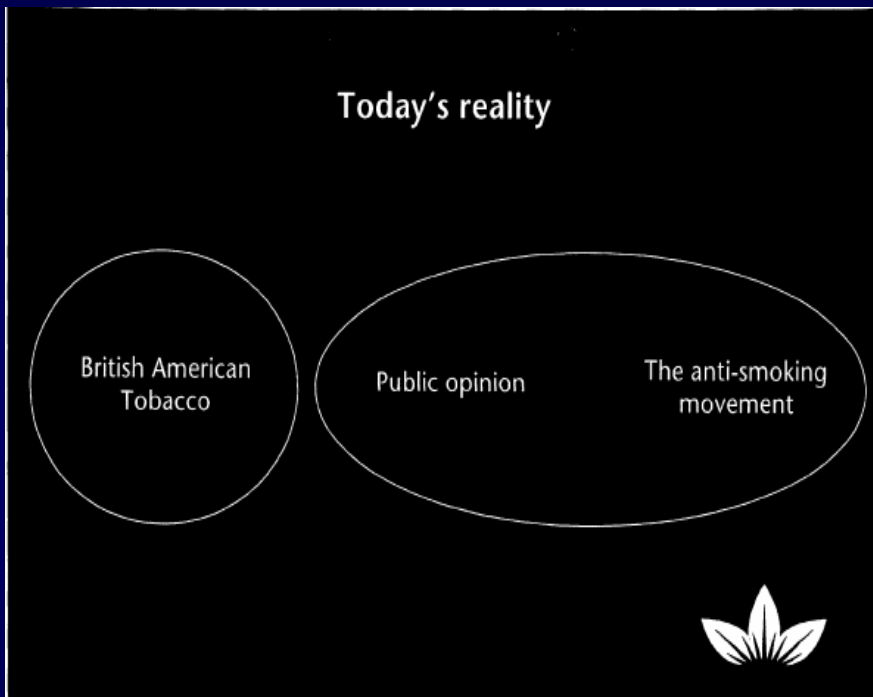
Coalitions of those impacted by increased excise taxes need to be formed and studies should be contracted with think tanks to show the impact of excise taxes on working people. The various tax alternatives should be explored and presented as part of this project. These studies should be published and a press program developed with the think tank carrying the message not the industry or RJR.

RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company, 1990: <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/mzi43d00>

Think-tank sponsored white paper. This paper would focus on the impact of tobacco exports from the free and fair trade angle. It could be commissioned to a think tank like the Hudson Institute, the American Enterprise Institute or The Heritage Foundation. If commissioned, part of the agreement could call for the author to participate in a media road show to explain and defend the findings. Third-party institute aegis will provide media access and credibility at a level not usually afforded the industry.

Philip Morris Tobacco Company, 1991: <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/szr64a00>

The tobacco industry's declining credibility



British American Tobacco, 2000: <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/dew70a99>

Tobacco companies believed this decline was impacting on their ability to influence policy (Fooks et al, 2011).

Tobacco Companies' use of Think Tanks in the UK and EU

In the UK (Louise Kay, MSc dissertation, University of Edinburgh 2011), the following think tanks were found to have undertaken a significant amount of work for tobacco companies:

- Adam Smith Institute
- Centre for Policy Studies
- Global Futures
- Institute of Economic Affairs
- Policy Studies Institute
- Chatham House
- Social Affairs Unit

In the EU (Jennifer Torres, MSc dissertation, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 2009), the following think tanks were found to have undertaken a significant amount of work for tobacco companies:

- Adam Smith Institute
- Centre for New Europe
- Centre for Policy Studies
- European Policy Centre
- Philip Morris' Institute for Public Policy Research
- Social Affairs Unit

British American Tobacco, the European Policy Centre and Impact Assessment...



Katherine Smith, Anna Gilmore, Gary Fooks, Jeff Collin, Heide Weishaar & Sema Mandal



<http://www.plosmedicine.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pmed.1000202> (available free to all)

<http://jech.bmj.com/content/64/6/478.full> (available free for all)

Tobacco industry and public health interest in Impact Assessment (IA)



- Aims to assess likely effects of policy options & thus inform policy choices.
- A variety of types of impact assessment (IA) exist (e.g. BIA, HIA, EIA) so IA can promote very different political priorities.
- Public health advocates have tended to focus on HIA & EIA so have welcomed increasing policy interest...
- But, focusing on BIA, so have large corporations...

What's in evidence-based policy tools such as IA for large corporations?



- A tool to promote costs of legislation to business
- An economic & utilitarian frame for non-market outcomes
- May increase resource inter-dependencies between policymakers and external actors
- Can be used to:
 - challenge precautionary principle
 - delay and challenge regulation
 - secure business representation in stakeholder consultation

British American Tobacco's interest in IA:



Flyer from IMPACT (taken from BAT's files):

The Compliance Cost Assessment and Fiche d'Impact system, far from being just another bureaucratic requirement, offers business and industry a major new opportunity to influence the policy and legislative process. In this section, we explain how it can be done.

Working the system

2.1 Business impact assessments can be used

- o To oppose or amend policy proposals
- o To promote industry's legislative or regulatory proposals
- o To challenge Government to review existing regulatory or legislative burdens.

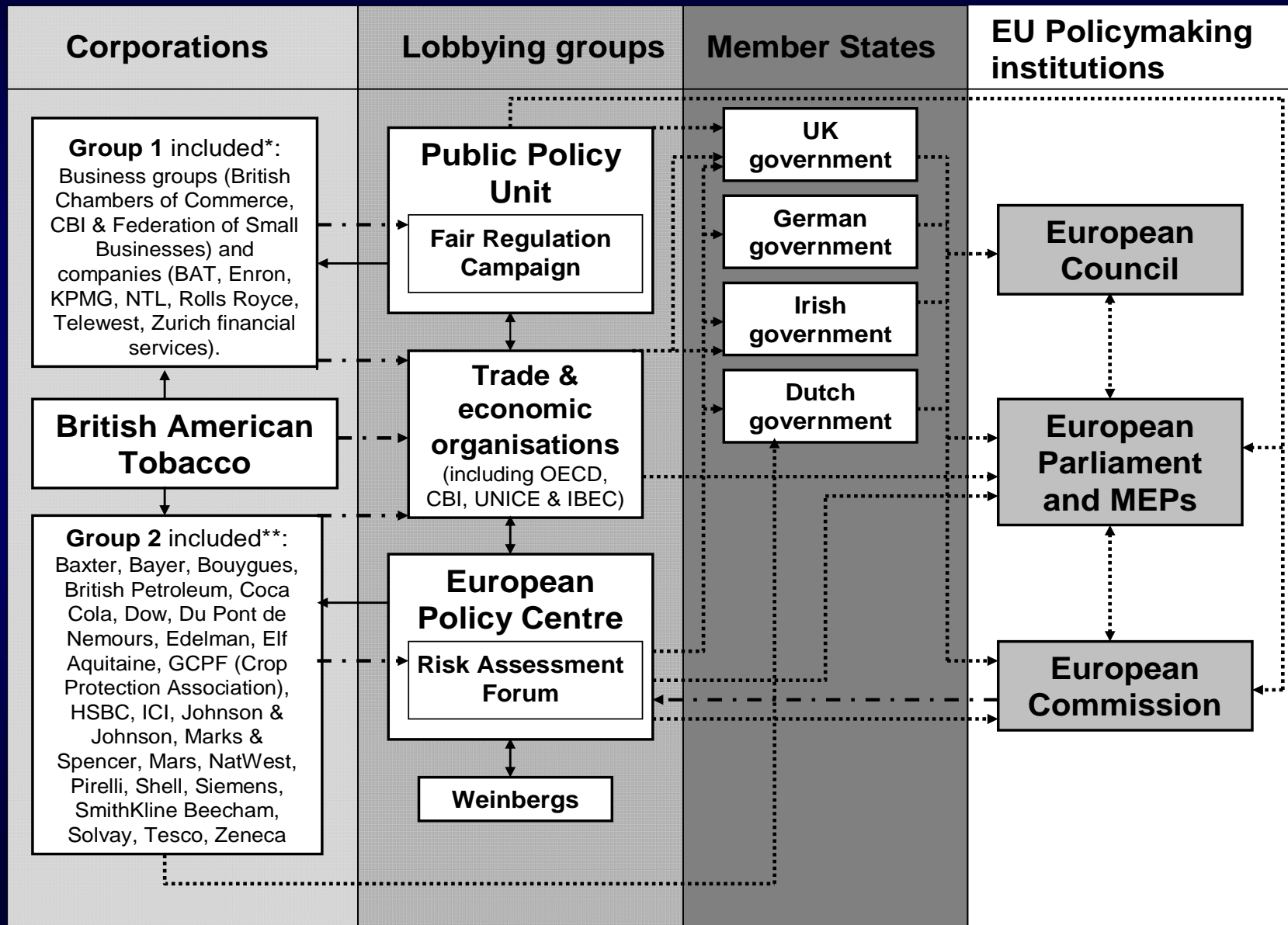
(IMPACT). Impact Assessments: Changing the Way Business Deals with Government. 95/06/07: <http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu/tid/fjf14a99> Accessed on: 24 Jul 2008.

Specifically, BAT believed IA/CBA could help prevent bans on advertising:

- A proposal to ban cigarette advertising is also unlikely to be underpinned by a proper analysis of the costs and benefits. Again, the claimed benefits are likely to include health benefits through a reduction in the incidence of smoking and a reduction in the incidence of under-age smoking. However, an objective view of the data on the impact of advertising bans would make it difficult to conclude that advertising bans reduce consumption.

BAT Shaping the Regulatory Environment: Advertising and Public Smoking. Unknown date: <http://bat.library.ucsf.edu/tid/xnz82a99> Accessed on: 23 May 2008.

BAT's multifaceted lobbying approach:



The outcome: a change to the Treaty of Amsterdam

The outcome

The new Treaty of the EU includes a (legally binding) Protocol on subsidiarity (the need to push decision making as far down as possible). Chapter 9 states:

*Without prejudice to its right of initiative, **the Commission should:***

- *Except in cases of particular urgency or confidentiality, **consult widely before proposing legislation and, wherever appropriate, publish consultation documents:***
- ***take duly into account the need for any burden, whether financial or administrative, falling upon the Community, national governments, local authorities, economic operators and citizens, to be minimised and proportionate to the objective to be achieved:***

So, the Commission must now take into account *the financial and administrative burden (cost)*, which has to be *minimised and proportionate to the objective (benefit)*.

British American Tobacco has achieved an important victory in a key trade bloc. A priority should now be to encourage and empower other parts of the world to embark on similar exercises.

Summary

- Research funding plays an important role in the relationship between research and policy (Smith, 2010);
- Think tanks do appear to produce more policy relevant research and are usually better at achieving policy impact;
- However, efforts to achieve more ‘policy relevant’ research may constrain innovative, longer-term research (i.e. there are arguments for maintaining some separation between academic research and policy);
- In the 1980s and 1990s, the tobacco industry documents suggest that some UK and EU think tanks were operating very similarly to corporate consultancies – further research is needed to explore whether this remains the case and to what extent it varies between think tanks;
- Does academic research offer something qualitatively different to think tank research that is worth maintaining?

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