

# Innovation and the knowledge economy: think tanks as knowledge intermediaries



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Bridging the Gap Conference

7<sup>th</sup> December 2011

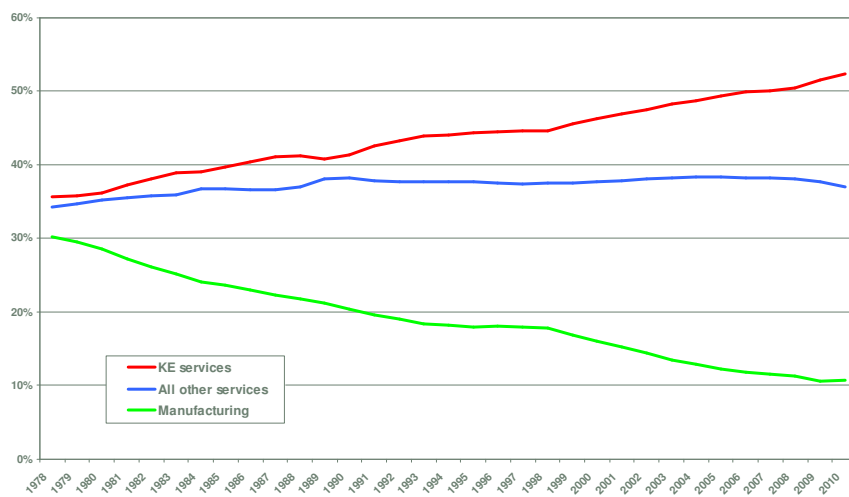


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## More jobs in knowledge based services 1978-2007

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share of employees in employment, GB. Knowledge based services WF estimates from Office for National Statistics figures based on OECD definitions and includes communications, financial services, business services, education and health. All other services includes retail, hospitality, transport, public administration and other community, social and personal services. Manufacturing includes both knowledge based and other sectors.



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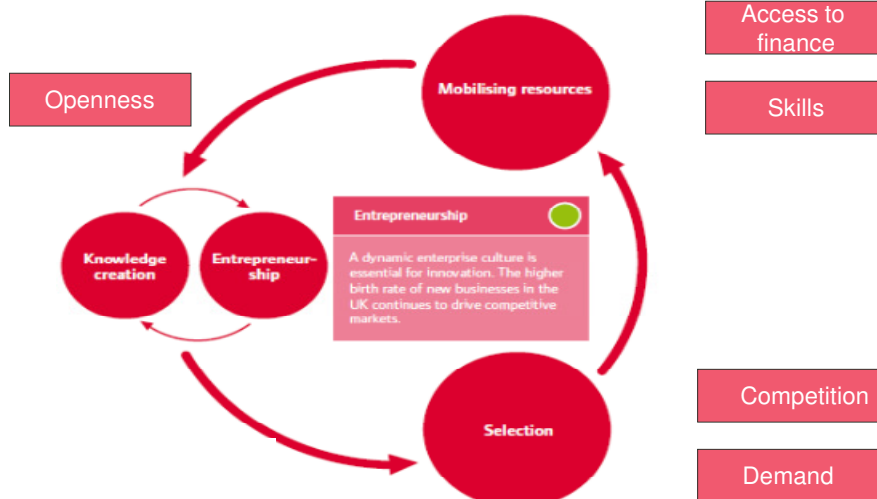
## Think tanks and the UK knowledge economy



- “While the range of activities making up the business services sector may be diverse, they are united by an important theme: they all **sell expertise, advice or information to businesses**, but do not generally produce anything tangible. This makes it easy to underestimate the role of these business services, but they play a vital role in underpinning the success of all businesses.” (Sissons, 2011: 5)
- These services are unique because their outputs are almost exclusively intangible – they do not involve any physical processes, but involve the *creation, accumulation or dissemination* of knowledge or information.
- Key distinction:
  - **Networked services** – services which provide knowledge, advice or technical support *directly* to other businesses; and
  - **Intermediary services** – services which reduce transaction costs between businesses and customers, by providing *targeted information or matching buyers and sellers*

Sissons, Andrew (2011) Britain's Quiet Success Story: Business Services in the Knowledge Economy, London: the Work Foundation, <http://www.theworkfoundation.com/Reports/287/Britains-Quiet-Success-Story-Business-Services-in-the-Knowledge-Economy>

## Think tanks as intermediaries in the system

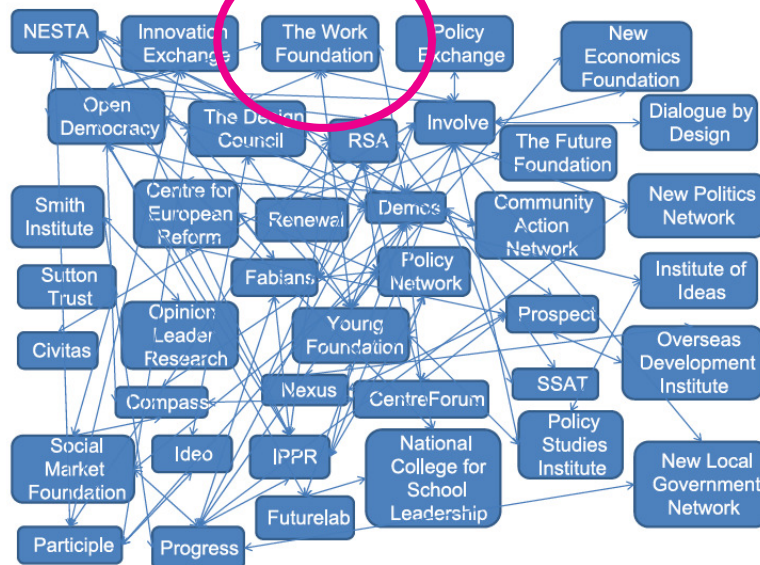


## The critique of think tanks

- Right-wing (Sebba et al. 2011)
- Closed-circles (Ball and Exley, 2010)
- 'Disproportionately represented' in media coverage of 'research' on policy issues (Welner et al., 2010)
- Under-qualified staff
- Have the answer before the question / research

Ball, S. J. and Exley, S (2010) 'Making Policy with 'good ideas': policy, networks and the 'intellectuals' of New Labour, *Journal of Education Policy*, 25, No. 2, 151-69  
Welner et al (2010) Think Tank Research Quality. Charlotte: IAP

## Ball and Exley (2010:164)



## Two types of think tank?

- **RAND Corporation:**

- “Aimed, in a time of crisis ... to think imaginatively, to develop genuinely new ways of solving problems that would contribute to the war effort. ... staffed by scientists, economists and social scientists all struggling to think of new ways of dealing not just with the dangers of the Cold War but also imagining new futures and new concepts of how society could work.”

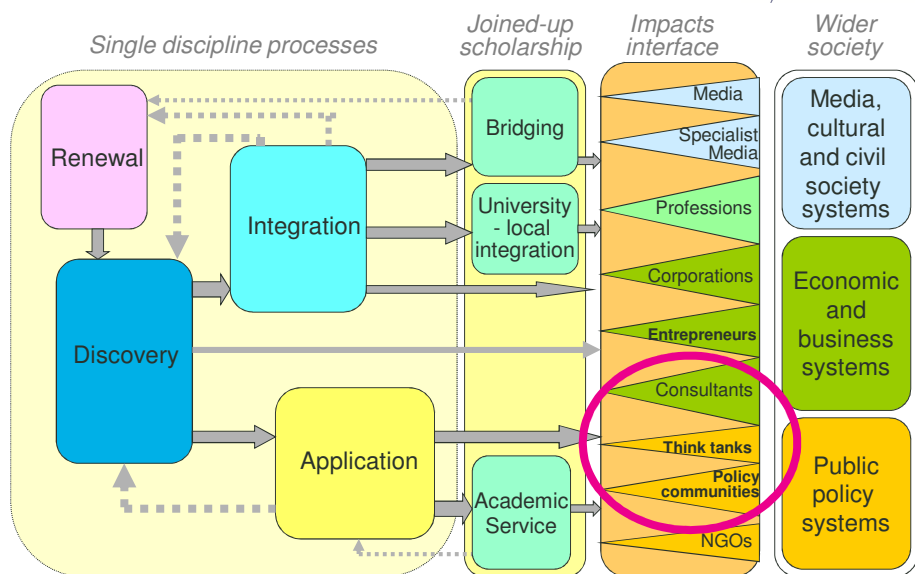
- **Fisher’s IEA:**

- “The Think Tank that Antony Fisher set up was very different. It had no interest in thinking up new ideas because it already knew the “truth”. It already had all the ideas it needed laid out in Professor Hayek’s books. Its aim instead was to influence public opinion - through promoting those ideas.”
- “It should pretend to be non-political and neutral, but in reality they both knew that would be a front”

Adam Curtis, *the Curse of TINA*, BBC: 13<sup>th</sup> Sept 2011,

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/adamcurtis/2011/09/the\\_curse\\_of\\_tina.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/adamcurtis/2011/09/the_curse_of_tina.html)

## Think tanks and Universities



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Source: Dunleavy, June 2011

## Universities and think tanks – the pressures of the REF?



- ‘Impact’ and its demonstration
- Impact ‘case studies’

Formal think tank / university links:

- IFS / UCL
- The Work Foundation / Lancaster University
- Rumours of other tie-ups in 2012...
- What’s driving this?



## Towards a positive role for think tanks as research intermediaries



- *Why can’t a researcher be more like a think tanker...?*
- **Moves to:** engage more with policy, business, other stakeholders, tweet, communicate differently
- As knowledgeable intermediaries in the nexus between research, policy and practice (‘engaged scholarship’ (Ven de Ven 2006) etc.)
- **As hothouses of talent?**
  - Tender to be younger (or at least more influential when younger...)
- As part of greater **fluidity between academic and policy / business careers?**
  - (the Fraunhofers in Germany etc.)
- **As drivers of innovation?**
  - Linked appropriately to academic research