

Think tank of the year

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The past year has been dominated by the effects of economic weakness and the beginnings of recovery. Politicians have struggled to convince voters that society can function well while public spending is frozen or shrinking—and that they might have to accept less in pensions, healthcare and education than they had expected. In Britain, despite faint signs of the return of growth, this remains the central problem of domestic policy—can the country do more, with less? The eurozone crisis is in abeyance—but, many argue, only for now. Violence and protests in Turkey and Brazil highlight that even in fast growing countries voters are challenging their governments.

Problems outside the economic sphere are legion, most urgently in Syria, which risks becoming the focus of a proxy war. The announcement by the United States that it would talk to the Afghan Taliban has raised some hopes of a deal but also the retort that the 12-year intervention has bought little success. The violence in Afghanistan has not stopped—neither have the centrifuges of Iran’s nuclear programme.

It was against this backdrop that *Prospect* held the Think Tank Awards 2013, now in their 13th year. The awards recognise the organisations that contend with these problems and whose ideas, events and publications help to shape the thinking of government and public towards the national and international policy debate. In picking the winners, the judges were looking for rigour of thought and originality, and gave special attention to the ideas that had proved most influential.

The judges

The awards were presented on 25th June at the Royal Society. The judges were: Shami Chakrabarti, Director of Liberty and Chancellor of Oxford Brookes University; Bill Emmott, former Editor of the *Economist*; Richard Lambert, Chancellor of Warwick University, former Editor of the *Financial Times* and member of the Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee; David Lammy, Labour MP for Tottenham; Bronwen Maddox, Editor of *Prospect*; and David Willetts, Conservative MP for Havant and Minister of State for Universities and Science.

International Publication of the Year

This award covers publications by think tanks not based in the UK. The US-based Carnegie Endowment for International Peace was commended by judges for its report, “Iran’s Nuclear Odyssey: Costs and Risks.” This was described as “original and interesting” for its suggestion that the only possible solution is a peaceful diplomatic settlement with Iran. The international community, the report noted, might do well to offer Iran advanced solar technology—its potential solar capacity is 13-times greater than its total domestic need.

The Cato Institute, also based in the US, caught the eye of the judges for its recent book on the legalisation of drugs, *The Fire Next Door*. The book maintains that the US’s prohibition of

narcotics has empowered the drug cartels in Mexico with disastrous effects. The only solution now, it argued, is to legalise drugs. The judges were impressed by the book's thoroughness and the intellectual flexibility that it suggested.

However, the International Publication of the Year category was won by Carnegie Europe, the European arm of the Carnegie Endowment, for its report "Press Freedom in Turkey." This was a thorough and prescient examination of the control exerted on journalists by Ankara. The report was impressive and timely, given the demonstrations in Gezi Park and Taksim Square.

North American Think Tank of the Year

In the US, the Peterson Institute was considered immensely impressive, with extensive access and influence on US policy. However, one judge suggested that, now the first signs of economic recovery are appearing in the US, it is not certain that the Peterson has lifted its gaze from the financial crisis to questions of growth.

The Brookings Institution report, "The Thistle and the Drone," explored the relations between central governments and tribal societies on their periphery—germane now that the Afghan and US governments have decided to negotiate with the Taliban. For this and other work, the judges felt that Brookings was the runner-up in the category.

But the winner of this year's North American Think Tank Award was Third Way. A newcomer to the US think tank scene, founded in 2005 and still small, Third Way has had influence on the Obama team and was quick to home in on the plight of low to middle-income families and the difficulties they face in times of economic stagnation. The judges credited Third Way with making a real impact on debate in the centre ground of American politics, an arena which has seemed vanishingly small in recent years. They felt it was an organisation charged with a sense of urgency; one described their output as "really sexy," while another commented: "I like the bottom-up approach, and signs of innovation in a crowded and very rich think tank scene."

European Think Tank of the Year

This award is open to think tanks based in Europe, other than those in the UK. The winner in this category last year was Bruegel, the Brussels-based think tank which was a strong contender again this year. Its analysis of the economic challenges facing the eurozone remains strong and highly sophisticated, especially on the question of European banking union.

The Centre for European Policy Studies was runner-up. The organisation has had a "high relevance to critical issues in the euro crisis," according to one judge. Its analysis of the European banking system and the importance it has placed on more thorough banking supervision has put it right at the heart of the European debate, a position that it has occupied with great authority.

But this year's European Think Tank winner was the Italian Istituto Bruno Leoni. One judge commended the institute's members "for their struggle in a hostile environment for liberalism, but with a message increasingly relevant in the euro crisis." The judge added: "One might say that IBL did rather better last year in fostering the liberal message than did Mario Monti."

Awards for Think Tanks Based in the UK

Social policy

CentreForum has done “important” work this year, according to the judges, especially on adult social care and leasehold reform. However, they questioned whether the broad spread of CentreForum’s work had diffused its impact.

The IPPR is rapidly gaining momentum under its current directorship and has a “good in” with the leadership of the Labour party. However, as one judge remarked, “their time has not yet come.” The IPPR has “not had a lot to say on immigration, which is where we’d think they’d be big,” said one judge.

The Social Market Foundation, which last year won UK Think Tank of the Year, was commended for its economic analysis, which one judge termed “a good challenge to Osborne from not dissimilar territory to his own.” The Resolution Foundation was also singled out for its focus on low to middle-income families and the attention and influence that it enjoys—it was placed as runner-up. As the backer of Resolution is a shareholder in *Prospect*, Bronwen Maddox recused herself from this part of the judging.

But the winner was the Centre for Social Justice. Judges felt that its work in analysing the causes of poverty and social breakdown had put it at the core of a current debate. On welfare reform, child poverty and the question of universal credit, the CSJ has had a substantial impact. Also powerful was its analysis of modern slavery in the UK. The work culminated in a report entitled “It Happens Here,” which triggered a strong government response and further investigations by other organisations.

Economic and financial

Two think tanks, the Resolution Foundation and the Social Market Foundation, were both early in addressing the complex problems concerning the introduction of the universal credit system. The latter, one judge said, was proving very effective in “crawling all over George Osborne’s numbers.” The work of Centre for Cities was also cited as especially good and topical, as “cities are now increasingly part of the debate about growth.”

One judge asked whether all entrants were “asking the wrong questions”—still stuck in a debate about cuts and not about growth. “We should be asking about youth unemployment, about skills and education.” The winner this year was awarded jointly to two think tanks that had collaborated on an immensely influential report on the government’s dilemma about airport capacity—CentreForum and Policy Exchange. They argued for the expansion of Heathrow, and the influence of the report in Westminster and on the national debate was indisputable.

Energy and the environment

Chatham House has received a great deal of attention for its work on energy and environmental security. Its report, “Resource Futures,” addressed the new political and economic consequences of changing patterns in energy demand and was heavily covered by the international media. Its work on food security has also resonated widely. Judges also thought the Green Alliance’s work on the feed in tariff had been “of significance.”

The IPPR was runner-up in this category—the judges were especially impressed by its work on fracking. However, the winner of the energy and the environment category this year was the Institute of Economic Affairs, which the judges said has had an especially strong year. Its work on transport was engaging—the IEA has come down strongly against High Speed Two, the proposed rail link from London to Birmingham and made a strong case for the privatisation of the road network.

International affairs

Chatham House has had a strong year in foreign affairs, not least on the subject of China, while Open Europe, last year's winner, was noted for its close focus on the relationship between the UK and the EU.

The runner-up, the Royal United Services Institute has seemingly superseded the boundaries of normal think tank work. A Rusi delegation travelled to Pyongyang in late 2012 to hold talks with members of the Korean People's Army on the subject of North Korea's nuclear weapons programme—a unique channel of contact. Rusi has also had meetings with senior Taliban figures about Afghanistan—before the US announced it was prepared to speak to them—and its work on Syria and Iran has been strong.

But this year's International Affairs Think Tank of the Year award goes to the Centre for European Reform. For some years, the CER has seemed to struggle, its pro-European stance appearing to make comment on the troubles of the eurozone awkward. However, this year, the judges were impressed by the strength of the CER's economic analysis and its choice of subjects has gone right to the heart of the most pressing debates, not least concerning Britain's relationship with the EU and the costs of leaving. The CER has been widely cited in the media and has been highly influential.

One to Watch

The judges felt that New Philanthropy Capital performed an important role in channelling money to appropriate causes. As one judge put it: "it advises Goldman where to put its charitable funds, which is a good thing." The judges were glad that Centre for London existed but felt it had not yet picked up speed. The Wilberforce Society, the Cambridge University think tank, was also commended for its work.

The Nesta Policy and Research Unit was placed as runner-up for its report on economic growth and innovation, "Plan I." But the One to Watch winner this year was the Centre for Cities. In the search for economic recovery in Britain, the significance of cities looms large, and the judges felt that this made the centre an important participant in the discussion. Its City Deals programme, which has advocated the devolution of power from Whitehall to the city level, chimed closely with the Heseltine Report, which made similar recommendations.

UK Publication of the Year

Judges were impressed by the report by 2020 Health, the think tank specialising in healthcare, entitled "Too Posh to Wash." It investigated standards of nursing in the NHS, asking why lapses occur and what can be done to prevent them. In the light of recent NHS scandals, this was an highly relevant piece of work.

The Centre for Cities was singled out for its annual “Cities Outlook” report, which this year homed in on the problem of Britain’s housing shortfall. The judges also spent considerable time discussing the report by the Centre for European Policy Studies on the subject of the Target2 European payments system.

However, the award for UK Publication of the Year went to the Centre for Policy Studies, for its report on the threat to Britain’s open justice system. Entitled “Neither Just Nor Secure,” the report, written by Andrew Tyrie MP and Anthony Peto QC, warned that Britain’s complicity in extraordinary rendition was a shocking revelation—the justice and security bill does not have the weight to restore this lost confidence. The report was praised by the judges.

UK Think Tank of the Year

The judges spent much time discussing this. National debate in the past year has focused on which sections of society should bear the greatest burden of cuts, which should be shielded, and where Britain should seek to generate future growth. The judges concluded that the award for UK Think Tank of the Year should go to an organisation ranked highly in both the social policy and the economic categories. The winner, then, of the 2013 award for UK Think Tank of the Year was the Resolution Foundation.

The judges called its work strong, consistent and disciplined, and very successful in achieving impact in the national press and Westminster. In the past year, Resolution has held closely to its mission, which is to analyse the impact of policy on people on low to middle incomes in Britain and to argue how their prospects might be improved. The Resolution Foundation has covered subjects, including childcare, the benefits system, housing and low pay. This work has garnered substantial media attention, especially the work on childcare, which was cited by one judge as especially strong, and the declaration that the next election will be the “Living Standards election.”