SPECIAL REPORT

An incisive guide to Australia’s think tanks

Who are they? Who runs them? Who funds them? How accountable are they and how much influence do they really have? Robert Milliken reports on his extensive investigation into these bodies that are increasingly setting the agenda for governments.

ILLUSTRATION: SAM BENNETT
One speech reverberated around the world even more than Barack Obama’s when leaders gathered in Australia for the G20 summit last November. The day after the Brisbane summit Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel delivered a calculated attack on Russian President Vladimir Putin for his country’s incursions in Ukraine.


While other G20 leaders spoke from more conventional venues—President Obama at the University of Queensland, and China’s President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed federal parliament—Merkel’s platform was Sydney’s Lowy Institute for International Policy, one of Australia’s most prominent think tanks.

Merkel’s choice reflected a significant shift of another sort: the growing influence of think tanks in Australian public life. From just a handful a decade ago, some estimates put the number of think tanks in Australia today at about 30 (see page 37). Think tanks are reshaping how public policy is formed and debated in Australia, and their influence on public opinion and governments is growing. As Merkel’s appearance at the Lowy Institute suggests, they are also playing more entrepreneurial roles, and taking command of public debate and the key political players who drive it.

Michael Fullilove, the Lowy Institute’s executive director, had already snared Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese democracy leader, to speak during her Australian visit in 2013. (Fullilove went to Burma to invite Suu Kyi personally, hoping to “get Lowy at the front of the queue”).

A year before the Brisbane G20 summit, Fullilove had set out to persuade Merkel to deliver the annual Lowy Lecture, probably Australia’s most prestigious public address on international affairs. Past speakers include Rupert Murdoch, leading defence strategist Robert O’Neill, and Lionel Barber, editor of the Financial Times.

Of all the world leaders attending the G20, why Merkel?

“She’s the strongest leader in Europe,” Fullilove tells ASR. “Her presence and political qualities are outstanding. Russia was an important topic for Australians after the downing of MH17. We were very keen to secure her.”

Fullilove approached the German ambassador in Canberra, the Australian embassy in Germany and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

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Crucially, he then brought his think-tank credentials into play, through Lowy’s membership of the Council of Councils, an inner circle of 23 prestigious international foreign policy think tanks. This network enabled Fullilove to send a message directly to Merkel’s foreign policy adviser in Berlin.

“The German government understood the proposition,” he says. “We were inviting the Chancellor to speak at the signature annual event of Australia’s leading foreign-policy think tank.”

About 750 people attended Merkel’s speech at the Westin Hotel, the biggest event Lowy has ever hosted. The A-list audience included two former prime ministers, Paul Keating and John Howard; Angus Houston and David Hurley, both former Chiefs of the Australian Defence Force, and the latter now the NSW Governor; Michael Thawley,
head of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet; politicians, diplomats, business leaders and other influential figures.

The Lowy Lecture usually happens at a gala dinner. This one took place at 11 a.m. on a Monday to accommodate Merkel’s schedule. Nonetheless, seats were snapped up within five minutes of Lowy announcing the event. The audience listened through headphones to a simultaneous translation of Merkel’s speech in German, and later witnessed a snappy, illuminating Q&A session, some of it in English, between Merkel and Fullilove. (Watch highlights of Angela Merkel’s address to the Lowy Institute.)

For Merkel, the event gave her a global platform on which to abandon her earlier cautious tone towards Russia. For Fullilove, it raised Lowy’s status as a think tank with public impact.

“The gold medal for a think tank is not only to have a world leader speak, but to make a speech that is globally influential,” he says. “You have to have the idea and the wherewithal to get the person, and to convince them that they’re going to make a splash.”

MICHAEL WESLEY, Fullilove’s predecessor as head of the Lowy Institute, now a professor at the Australian National University’s College of Asia and the Pacific, estimates about 100 think tanks in Canada, 200 in Britain and an astonishing 10,000 in America.
Precise definitions of think tanks, he says, can be fluid. “But think tanks make Washington DC a city of ideas, in a way I’m not sure any of our capital cities are,” Wesley says. “I have a hope that Canberra might be, but we’re not there yet.”

Before Lowy started in 2003, two conservative think tanks championing free markets and small government dominated: Melbourne’s Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) and Sydney’s Centre for Independent Studies (CIS). The Australia Institute, which calls itself Australia’s “most influential progressive think tank”, started in Canberra in 1994. But the mushrooming of think tanks really started after Lowy’s foundation.

Over the past twelve years, the Grattan Institute and the Mitchell Institute have started in Melbourne, and Per Capita, another progressive think tank, has opened offices in Melbourne and Sydney. Unlike those that openly tout their political outlooks, the Lowy, Grattan and Mitchell institutes claim to be non-partisan. All of them now reach deeply into Australia’s power structures: their boards contain some of the country’s most influential people from business, finance, education and not-for-profit bodies.

A handful of others fall into separate categories again: the Menzies Research Centre and the Chifley Research Centre are small think tanks affiliated to the Liberal and Labor parties respectively, and are partly publicly funded.

Whatever their differences, the rise of think tanks has been spurred by the shrinking influence on public policy of the three main institutions that once supplied governments with most of their ideas: the public service, universities and the press. This has opened an ideas vacuum that think tanks are occupying.

The internet has slaughtered newspapers’ revenue, sending many out of business and downsizing others. Universities have turned inward, as academics share ideas more with each other than with the wider world.

The public service has suffered cuts under both sides of politics, which have left many policy functions outsourced. More policy advisers than ever now work inside ministers’ offices.

John Daley, chief executive of the Grattan Institute, believes the internet’s universal access to information has also upset the exclusive status that universities, the public service and the press might once have had as research and reporting centres. The internet has “lowered barriers of entry for analysts in all areas”.

The public service, Daley argues, can no longer attract as many people who might have seen it as an exclusive domain for policy analysis. Think tanks are now drawing in “extremely talented” ex-public servants.

“What presses their buttons is seeing their analysis get into print, in public, with their names on it, through think tanks,” Daley tells ASR.

What newspapers once called “think pieces”, written by senior journalists to magnify the background to big stories, are now more likely to be commissioned from think-tank analysts. On just one day, on 16 December, the Australian Financial Review carried two such pieces on events the previous day. Peter Jennings, executive director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute in Canberra, commented on the Martin Place siege in a piece titled “Sydney siege raises tough questions for our security”. On the facing page, under the
I’m very convinced that universities can’t do think tanks.

Allan Gyngell
Lowy Institute

Daley sees the Grattan Institute’s role as “seeking truth, not victory”. He contrasts this with the Heritage Foundation, one of America’s most conservative think tanks, which “sees victory as its role”.

This contrast highlights a crucial difference separating think tanks from some of the institutions whose roles they are now occupying. In think tanks’ quests to influence public policy, and in some cases to change it altogether, the opaque nature of some of their private funding raises important—and often impenetrable—questions about exactly whose interests they represent.

The Grattan Institute occupies a modest, two-storey brick building that started life as a machine tool shop in 1941, down a cobbled lane off heading “The budget has tied Abbott in knots”, Richard Denniss, executive director of the Australia Institute, commented on economic policy after the Treasurer’s release of the Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO).

“I’m very convinced that universities can’t do think tanks,” Allan Gyngell, the inaugural head of the Lowy Institute, tells ASR. Gyngell had been a diplomat, an analyst with the Office of National Assessments, the prime minister’s intelligence body (which he later headed) and an adviser to Prime Minister Paul Keating.

“For academics, the only path to making your way is through teaching and the number of peer-reviewed journal articles you produce,” he says. “There are no benefits from going to conferences and buttonholing foreign ministers, the way think-tank people do. For think tanks, the rewards come from the impacts you have through conferences, writing op-ed articles, talking to people, planting seeds on policy that may produce something.”

Think tanks arrived relatively late in Australia. Wesley traces the first think tank to Britain in 1831, when the Duke of Wellington founded the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) for defence and security research.

Gyngell sees modern think tanks starting in America in 1916, when the businessman and philanthropist Robert S. Brookings helped to form the “first private institute devoted to a scientific analysis of public policy issues”. It later became the Brookings Institution, the “father of think tanks”.

Like these trailblazers, most of Australia’s think tanks are private institutions, with the majority of their funding coming from private philanthropists and donors, some publicly undisclosed.

Gyngell identifies three further characteristics of think tanks: they are not-for-profit bodies, and their key roles are to research public policy and to contribute to public debate. Above all, they are united by a “commitment to shape outcomes in the world of policy”.

Martin Indyk, an Australian foreign policy expert who became US Ambassador to Israel under President Bill Clinton, and now a senior figure at Brookings and a member of the board of the Lowy Institute, puts it more bluntly.

“Our business is to influence policy,” Indyk told the New York Times last September. “To be policy-relevant, we need to engage policy-makers.”

In pursuing this role, think tanks are sharing a rapidly growing space vacated by old media in feeding the public’s interest in policy debates.

“We’re one of the new players in a changing landscape,” says Daley of the Grattan Institute. He nominates Guardian Australia, the Drum, Inside Story and ASR as examples of new online media moving into the same space.
Grattan Street in the inner-Melbourne suburb of Carlton. The University of Melbourne, which owns the building, offered it as Grattan’s home when it opened in 2008. Thirty staff work in a converted open space upstairs.

Grattan was born of Sydney–Melbourne rivalry. When John Howard’s government inaugurated the United States Studies Centre in 2006 with a federal endowment of $25 million, it chose the University of Sydney, instead of Melbourne University, which had also hoped to house it.

That triggered a group of Melbourne powerbrokers to hatch a plan for a new think tank in their city. They included Labor Premier Steve Bracks; Terry Moran, then head of the Premier’s Department; Glyn Davis, Melbourne University Vice-Chancellor; and Allan Myers, a leading barrister who is now Grattan’s chairman.

The Rudd government in Canberra and the Brumby government in Victoria each endowed Grattan with $15 million. BHP Billiton and the National Australia Bank, two Melbourne-based leading companies, provided $4 million and $1 million respectively, launching Grattan with a total endowment of $35 million.

Daley was recruited as chief executive. He has degrees in law and science, and had worked for the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet, McKinsey and ANZ Bank.

Unlike the Lowy Institute’s exclusive focus on foreign affairs, Grattan’s constitution stipulates that it look at domestic policy.

Because of its inaugural funding by federal and state Labor governments, Grattan’s work is sometimes branded as having a left-wing perspective. Daley insists they are non-partisan.

“We sit in the sensible centre,” he says. “We talk to all sides of politics, and all sides ring us up regularly.”

Grattan’s board hardly suggests a Labor-friendly outfit. Its members include David Kemp, a former Howard government minister and brother of Rod Kemp, chairman of Australia’s most right-wing think tank, the IPA. Others are Andrew Mackenzie, BHP Billiton’s chief executive, and Peter Scanlon, a property tycoon and philanthropist. Two more, ABC broadcaster Geraldine Doogue and businesswoman and former Lord Mayor Lucy Turnbull, are from Sydney.

Some think tanks refuse to identify all their financial supporters, arguing their funders’ wish for confidentiality. This can raise speculation about their independence, and whether some think tanks are, or can become, de facto lobbyists for certain industries or causes. The New York Times last September exposed how some Washington think tanks had accepted tens of millions of dollars to undertake research on behalf of foreign governments seeking to win influence “on the
Men from Melbourne’s business establishment founded the IPA in 1943 to counter what they saw as the “threat of permanent and extensive government control”.

Lowy established the think tank with a gift of $30 million. It now runs on an annual budget of about $8 million. The Lowy family’s share has fallen to about 60 per cent, with the rest coming from Australian and international philanthropic foundations, membership and government and corporate grants to some Lowy research programs. Its website lists all donors.

Some conservatives have labelled Lowy, like Grattan, a leftish think tank. Like Grattan, the composition of Lowy’s board defies such simplistic characterization. Besides Mark Ryan, a former adviser to ex-Prime Minister Paul Keating, it includes ABC Chairman James Spigelman, the former NSW Chief Justice and an adviser to Prime Minister Gough Whitlam; Judith Sloan, a right-wing free market economist; and former Reserve Bank Governor Ian Macfarlane. Michael Thawley, a former adviser to Prime Minister John Howard, stepped down from the board when he became head of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet late last year. Rupert Murdoch is a member of Lowy’s international advisory council.

One of the think tank’s biggest impacts on public debate has come from the annual Lowy Institute Poll, which records Australians’ attitudes towards...
America, China, the Asia-Pacific region, national security and other international issues. Climate change has been one of the poll’s most tracked topics.

Gyngell insisted on a separate budget for this poll when he took on the job.

“There had been no way of tracking over time what Australians thought about the world,” he explains. “Politicians had been able to get away with any claim about how much they were in tune with Australians’ views. The Lowy Poll has shown it’s not possible to conduct the international debate in the same way any more.”

PHILANTHROPY FROM the media entrepreneur Harold Mitchell launched the Mitchell Institute, in partnership with Victoria University in Melbourne, in 2013. Lindsay Tanner, a former federal Labor finance minister and chairman of its advisory board, says inadequate education and health care facing a “significant minority” of young Australians motivated Mitchell to jointly fund this think tank.

“The measure of our performance will be how our ideas can change what governments do in positive ways,” says Tanner.

Grattan and Lowy are probably Australia’s most successful examples of so-called “evidence-based” think tanks: those that base their reports on rigorous research independent of any political viewpoint, in the hope that their work will have an impact on public policy. Whatever their perspectives, most think tanks no doubt would regard their work as rigorous.

But some so-called “advocacy” think tanks unashamedly proclaim conservative or progressive agendas. Per Capita, a small progressive think tank, says that a “gap in the Australian marketplace for ideas” helped to trigger its launch in Melbourne in 2007. David Hetherington, Per Capita’s chief executive, had worked with the Institute for Public Policy Research, a progressive think tank in Britain. He says two “very strong conservative, free market think tanks”—the IPA and the CIS—had successfully influenced debate in Australia for decades. “There were no strong incumbents on the progressive side.”

Men from Melbourne’s business establishment founded the IPA in 1943 to counter what they saw as the “threat of permanent and extensive government control”. Since John Roskam became its executive director eleven years ago, the IPA has been more assertive about pushing its views through mainstream and social media. The IPA’s website boasts that its people are across the Australian media “several times a day aggressively making the case for liberty”. It has been one of the chief skeptics in the climate change debate, and a driving force in the “free speech” debate, demanding repeal of Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act, which bans so-called “hate speech”.

The IPA has also called for repeal of Australia’s plain cigarette-packaging laws, arguing they “restricted the right of companies to market legal products”. Coincidentally, this is a core argument that Big Tobacco has mounted against the laws. Unlike other think-tank heads, Roskam declined to speak with ASR. Elsewhere, he has refused to discuss or deny reports that two of the world’s biggest tobacco companies, Philip Morris and British American Tobacco, have been among the IPA’s donors. The IPA says it is funded by members and “philanthropic and corporate donors”, but refuses to identify them.

Before he joined the IPA, Roskam had taught political theory at the University of Melbourne, managed government and corporate affairs at Rio Tinto, ran the Menzies Research Centre, and worked for David Kemp when Kemp was federal education minister.

The IPA’s board chairman is Rod Kemp, like his brother David, a former Howard government minister. Their father Charles Kemp and Rupert Murdoch’s father Sir Keith Murdoch helped to found the IPA. A senior figure from another Australian think tank describes the IPA as “well embedded in the Liberal Party”.

Under Tony Abbott’s leadership of the Liberal Party, at least, there are good grounds for this assertion. In April 2013, five months before he
became Prime Minister, Abbott spoke at a dinner to mark the IPA's seventieth anniversary. Guests included the mining tycoon Gina Rinehart; Rupert Murdoch was another speaker. Abbott praised the think tank as “freedom’s friend”. He declared “a big fat Yes to many of the 75 specific policies you urged upon me” if he won government.

He listed some: repeal the carbon and mining taxes; abolish the Department of Climate Change and the Clean Energy Fund; privatize Medibank Private; trim the public service; repeal section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act “at least in its current form”.

Abbott’s government has reneged on only two of these promises, failing to get abolition of the Clean Energy Finance Corporation (the correct name of the body he called a “Fund”) through the Senate, and backing down on its pledge to repeal section 18C.

REG LINDSAY, a former high-school mathematics teacher, founded the CIS in 1976 after discovering the works of classic liberal thinkers such as Adam Smith, John Locke, Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek (a portrait of Hayek hangs prominently in the think tank’s headquarters in St Leonards, on Sydney’s Lower North Shore). Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, a champion of big government, had lost power the previous year.

“I asked if we were coming to the end of the period of government intervention in the economy,” says Lindsay. “I felt the classic liberals’ side hadn’t had sufficient airing in Australia.”

Thirty-nine years later, Lindsay is still its chief executive and the CIS has thirteen staff, fourteen research scholars and has produced “hundreds” of papers. About two-thirds of its $3 million annual budget comes from “philanthropic” donors; Lindsay will not identify them. The CIS says it will not accept government funding, but seeks donations including through a “Capital Fund” that solicits amounts of up to $500,000. Donors are named after free-market heroes. Contribute $100,000 to become an “Alexis de Toqueville Fellow”; $500,000 makes you an “E.A. Hayek Fellow”. (The Grattan Institute, by contrast, seeks donations as small as $50.)

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<th>Think tanks’ influence on Abbott’s government</th>
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<td><strong>Policies adopted</strong></td>
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<td>Introduce a special economic zone in the north of Australia » IPA, white paper promised</td>
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<td>Superannuation fees to be cut » Grattan, adopted by Murray Report</td>
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<td><strong>Polices attempted but withdrawn or failed to pass the Senate</strong></td>
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<td>Repeal Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act » IPA</td>
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<td>Eliminate the National Preventative Health Agency » IPA</td>
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<td>Abolish the Climate Change Authority » IPA; AI lobbying prevented</td>
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<td>Close remote Indigenous communities, WA Barnett government 2014 » CIS</td>
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Some of the biggest names in Australian business sit on the CIS’s 23-person board. They include Michael Chaney, chairman of the National Australia Bank and Woodside Petroleum; Chris Roberts, chairman of Orora, a packaging company recently demerged from Amcor; Sir Rod Eddington, non-executive chairman (Australia and New Zealand) of JP Morgan; and Nicholas Moore, chief executive of Macquarie Group. Three members have backgrounds with McKinsey management consultants. Michael Rennie, one of the board’s two deputy chairmen, is a McKinsey director in Dubai, and its former leader in Australia and New Zealand. Alison Watkins, chief executive of Coca-Cola Amatil, worked with McKinsey for a decade, and Robert McLean, an LJ Hooker director, for 25 years; McLean is still a senior adviser to McKinsey.

Asked how he sees his think tank’s role, Lindsay replies: “To influence elite opinion. I’m a great Hayekian. Hayek talked about ‘second-hand dealers in ideas’. Most people get their ideas from someone else: teachers, journalists, think tanks. So we set out to influence. We don’t actively seek relationships with government. But politicians are certainly part of our ideas transmission.”

At least one CIS proposal, on the management of remote indigenous communities, has surfaced in state and federal government policies. Helen Hughes, a CIS senior fellow who died in June 2013, had been a strong critic of post-1970s policies towards Indigenous Australia that promoted the return of communities to traditional lands. She argued many remote communities were economically unsustainable. Some see Hughes’s arguments behind the Northern Territory Intervention, when the Howard government suspended racial discrimination laws and sent police and troops to take charge of distressed Indigenous communities.

“Helen was blamed for the Intervention,” says Lindsay. “Unfairly, I thought.”

Soon after he became Prime Minister, Abbott offered Kirribilli House, the Prime Minister’s Sydney residence, as the venue for a CIS-initiated commemoration to Hughes. (Lindsay and Abbott go back a long way. Before he began the CIS, Lindsay invited the then combative student politician at Sydney University to speak at an informal “dinner club” Lindsay ran in Lindfield, in the Liberal Party’s then heartland on Sydney’s North Shore.)

And Hughes’s arguments on remote communities are still being taken up. Last November Western Australian Premier Colin Barnett announced his government planned to close up to 150 of WA’s 274 remote Indigenous communities because they were “not viable”.

DURING THE Abbott government’s first fifteen months, think tanks have had a demonstrable impact on several policies, including climate change. The Australia Institute (AI) has made climate policy a chief focus since Richard Denniss, an economist, ex-academic and strategy adviser to Bob Brown, former leader of the Australian Greens, became its executive director in 2008.

In June 2014, the AI successfully lobbied the Palmer United Party to vote against the renewable energy target’s abolition, denying Abbott one of his key election undertakings. Palmer’s party also helped to block Abbott’s plan to scrap the Climate Change Authority, a federal advisory body, and
the Clean Energy Finance Corporation, which the former Labor government launched to invest in clean energy projects.

“I have no doubt that we influenced their decision,” says Denniss. “We gave the Palmer party good evidence that a renewables target pushes electricity prices down, and encourages investment. We were the first people to talk to them about that sort of thing.”

Palmer’s party ignored the AI’s advice to save the carbon tax, however, and delivered the crucial votes that enabled Abbott to fulfill one of his key promises to the IPA.

But if the IPA was happy with that, it has not disguised its anger with Abbott for walking away from his pledge to repeal of Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act. When in August 2014 his government introduced draconian anti-terrorism laws sparked by the rise of Islamic State, Abbott claimed the planned repeal had become a “complication” with Australia’s Muslim community at a time when “everyone needs to be part of Team Australia”.

Roskam spoke of being “astounded” and in a state of “deep shock” at Abbott’s apparent betrayal. In the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in January 2015, the IPA has renewed pressure on the government to repeal Section 18C. For now, Abbott says no.

DIRECTLY OR NOT, other think-tank proposals have filtered into government policy-making. After the IPA’s call for a “special Economic Zone” in northern Australia, former Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd promised to cut company taxes in that region by a third. And Abbott has promised a White Paper on northern Australia.

Several Grattan Institute proposals on deficit management—broadening the GST and reining in health costs—now feature strongly in political debate. A Grattan report exposing Australia’s high superannuation fund fees was taken up last year by the Financial System Inquiry, headed by David Murray.

David Hetherington of Per Capita says: “Investing in ideas has long been unfashionable on the Australian political landscape. With so little policy development coming from the major political parties, debate will now be shaped increasingly by the effectiveness of think tanks.”

If so, their big challenge will be to include subjects that are still crying out for fresh ideas: women’s and Indigenous affairs, immigration and civil society. And if the recent experience of Washington DC, sometimes known as “think tank central”, is any guide, growing scrutiny of who funds them will be part of that story.