

## German think-tanks

### Pennies for their thoughts

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#### Needed: a new sort of place for brains to make waves

WHEN a nation has produced Immanuel Kant and Georg Hegel, it seems safe to say that thinking deeply is among its strengths. But when it comes to reflections of a more practical nature, the German way of generating new ideas fails to reach the desired level of output.

Take the issue of demography. If Germany has one chronic problem, it is that of ageing. Yet when the Berlin Institute for Population and Development, a small think-tank, wanted money to study demography and its policy implications, German foundations yawned; America's Hewlett Foundation finally stepped in.

Very gradually, think-tanks are becoming a factor in Germany's public policy. But life is still hard for *Denkfabriken*, as they are called—thanks to a rigid political system and career structure. That is more than a hypothetical problem in a country where the quality of debate is declining, political parties are increasingly content-free and the media ever more populist.

It is not that Germany has never heard of think-tanks; it has more than other large European countries. Josef Braml, a researcher at the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, itself a think-tank, has identified 123 not-for-profit, independent bodies aiming to influence policy. But they differ from America's equivalent, says Mr Braml.

The habit of hiring former (and future) government officials, churning out timely policy briefs with actionable advice, and catering to the media—the standard American approach—is still foreign to the world of German think-tanks. They are more like academic institutions in which eggheads pen long, theoretical treatises that go to the government, not the public.

Moreover, the various German elites are a bit like sealed castes, from which there is no easy exit. Politicians must work their way up the party hierarchy, researchers need academic credentials, and government officials are bound by civil service laws. Not much talent travels between government and think-tanks.

What is more, argues Mr Braml, there are striking cultural differences. Most German researchers cherish academic freedom and do not want to dirty their hands with politics. American think-tanks see private money as a way to stay independent from the government. To their German counterparts, public funds are a guarantee of being free of private interests—so they get their money from the state.

Yet this very dependence on the government is prompting a re-think among Germans whose job is reflection. Subsidies have been slashed, so there is no choice but to try some American tricks. Private sponsorship is one. Another is the production of relevant, timely papers which can be hawked to the press. One august body, the German Council on Foreign Relations, used to concentrate on hosting foreign dignitaries; now it aims to be more of a service provider for its sponsors.

Competition is also forcing older think-tanks to change. The move of Germany's capital from staid Bonn to dynamic Berlin has prompted some keen youngsters to start their own outfits. One such is BerlinPolis, which calls itself a "network" for the next generation. Another is the Global Public Policy Institute, which plans an American-style foreign-affairs journal.

Corporate think-tanks also play a part. On any public issue, the Bertelsmann Foundation, which controls the eponymous media group, has worthy things to say. The Alfred Herrhausen Society for International Dialogue, funded by Deutsche Bank, invites expertise from all over the world for discussions on broad topics such as the future of cities.

Will Germany's market-place of ideas ever resemble America's? Probably not, unless Germany's political system changes. It is a parliamentary democracy where strict party discipline stops legislators becoming true "political entrepreneurs" or traders in ideas. Also, Germany's firms and citizens prefer to give spare cash to cultural and social causes rather than to the churning out of ideas; this will not change fast. Nor would it help for Germany's think-tanks to copy American ones slavishly. Many of the latter have a rather short-term research agenda, because sponsors demand it. Perhaps Germany's best bet is a happy medium between the old *Denkfabriken*, chugging on government diesel, and snappy new think-tanks, using high-octane private gas. Call such bodies *Denktanks*, if you like.

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