

What is a think tank?



“You simply have to give people the opportunity to do better. It enriches their lives; they have money left over to give to preserving historic sites, to the arts, to science, to music, and so on. Most importantly, we all want to get other people out of poverty, and you can only do it by the wealth you have created.”

—Lady Margaret Thatcher, in a 1994 speech to a Fraser Institute dinner in Toronto



Why think tanks?

In a democracy, government policies must sooner or later reflect the will of the people. Therefore it’s crucial that the people—the electorate—understand how government policies will affect them and their families. Think tanks play a vital role in this process by providing the public with analysis, measurement, and constructive critiques of government policies.

Think tanks conduct research on specific problems, encourage the discovery of solutions to those problems, and facilitate interaction among researchers, scientists, economists, and academics in pursuit of these goals. Think tanks can be associated with universities or governments, or they can be stand-alone private organizations.

Think tanks as idea factories

The most important sources of political change are not politicians, political parties, or financial contributions. Rather, they are ideas generated on university campuses, in think tanks, and other research organizations. So how do think tanks—which by their very nature are involved with the academic and scholarly world—differ from academic institutions? In contrast to universities—which do their own important work—think tanks tend to be graded based on their success in solving real-world problems.

For example, before the collapse of Communism, underground copies of Milton Friedman’s book *Free to Choose* were smuggled into Eastern Europe, where

they introduced a generation of students and political dissidents to classical liberal economic ideas. That book and other Western publications played a decisive role in bringing about the collapse of Communism and later served as a foundation for those countries’ post-Communist economic policies.

Almost all important political change starts with an idea. Here are some examples:

- Margaret Thatcher and her advisors made use of research and policy recommendations provided by the Fraser Institute, among other organizations, in her efforts to rescue the ailing British economy;
- British Columbia’s then Premier Bill Bennett sought the advice of Michael Walker and the Fraser Institute in the early 1980s when Bennett reversed

The Institute is a “go to” source for information on a wide variety of topics



the province’s unsustainable spending and reformed BC’s Crown Corporations;

- Milton Friedman originally proposed the idea of a flat tax and the concept was subsequently promoted by the Fraser Institute. The flat tax has since been adopted in Russia, many Eastern European countries, and elsewhere around the world, including Alberta;
- Welfare reform, perhaps the most successful public policy reform of the last quarter-century, almost single-handedly flowed from Christopher Sarlo’s work for the Fraser Institute in Canada, and Charles Murray’s book *Losing Ground*, sponsored by the New York-based Manhattan Institute. The result was a renewal in urban neighbourhoods across North America as those formerly dependent on governments began to contribute to the neighbourhoods around them both economically and socially.

Intellectual entrepreneurs and the role of ideas

Ideas tend to filter through a hierarchy. They are generally started by intellectuals then

reach a larger audience through conferences, speeches, briefings, reports, and journal articles. Eventually the ideas cross over to newspaper editorials, general interest magazines, and radio and TV talk shows. Special interest groups may find an idea to their liking and help it along. Gradually, more and more people become aware of it. Politicians are often the last to climb on board.

The Fraser Institute and the ideas debate

The Fraser Institute is a non-partisan, independent think tank that neither seeks nor accepts government money. It is internationally renowned for its capacity to conduct research on a wide range of public policies and communicate to the public in a clear and effective way how those policies will affect people.

In Canada, the Fraser Institute has long pioneered techniques for measuring social and economic problems. For example, the Institute was the first to measure waiting times for medical treatment in Canada—evidence that was used by Canada’s Supreme Court to strike down barriers to private health care in Quebec.

Yet many people perceive think tanks as being impotent, producing papers and reports that collect dust on bookshelves. This belies an impatience for change. Ideas take time to generate change. Their impact occurs with a lag:

- The ideas of school vouchers and a flat tax became part of the national debate 30 years after Milton Friedman first proposed them;
- Britain passed the first anti-slavery law more than 20 years after Thomas Clarkson launched the abolition movement and it was another 26 years until slavery was finally abolished throughout the British Empire;
- Federal and provincial governments (outside of British Columbia) didn’t begin to rein in spending and balance their budgets until 10 years after the Fraser Institute first published reports about the danger of deficits.

Bottom line: *People who want important public policy changes need to be willing to make long-term investments.* Governments and bureaucracies are “big ships” and they are rarely turned around quickly.

... our work generated 16,745 news stories in Canadian and international media



People are not entitled to their own facts

“Excellence is not simply a matter of opinion, though judgment enters into its identification. Excellence has attributes that can be identified.”

—Charles Murray, *Human Accomplishment* (2003)

Credible think tanks rely primarily on measurement because disputes about public policies are often based on

policy can be resolved by the infusion of a generally agreed-upon set of facts.

Marketing ideas

The notion that ideas can be marketed like products has resulted in a vigorous public debate, in part stemming from news media coverage of the Fraser Institute’s work. The Fraser Institute employs a sophisticated communication strategy involving both mainstream news media and

creatively-presented educational information to the public.

For example, in 2011, the Fraser Institute’s work—be it on economic prosperity, school comparisons, health care waiting times, comparisons of countries on mining or energy policy, levels of taxation, stimulus spending, or federal and provincial budgets—resulted in 16,745 news stories in Canadian and international media about the Institute’s policy proposals and ideas.

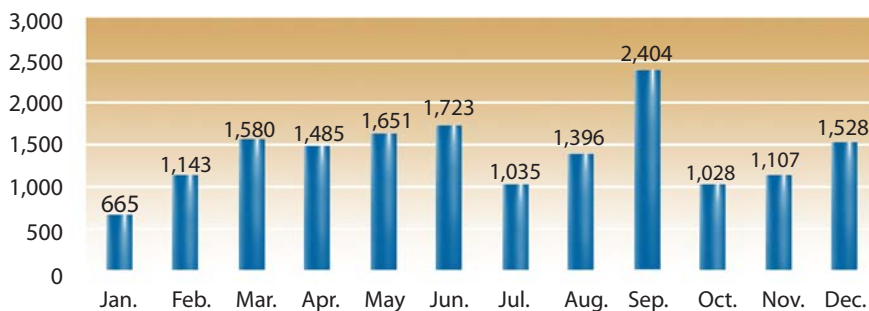
The Fraser Institute focus

The Fraser Institute was founded by Canadian industrialist T.P. Boyle with the advice of his colleague, economist and former Hungarian freedom fighter, Csaba Hajdu, and by the direct efforts of Sally Pipes, John Raybould, and Michael Walker.

Registered as an educational charity in 1974, the Fraser Institute is Canada’s largest non-partisan, independent think tank. With offices in Vancouver, Toronto, Calgary, and Montreal, it is also Canada’s only true national think tank.

Two main differences distinguish the Fraser Institute approach and its publications from those of other public policy think tanks:

Fraser Institute media mentions in 2011



personal opinions and anecdotal evidence. Rarely are the facts of the matter given careful consideration. While everyone is entitled to their own opinions, they are not entitled to their own facts. The rationale for much of the Fraser Institute’s research is that many disputes about public

social media to present members of the public with information about the policy choices they face. Ultimately, policy follows the path blazed by public opinion consensus; the Fraser Institute is without parallel in its capacity to influence the evolution of public opinion by providing timely and

The Institute's school report cards are downloaded more than 1 million times every year



an empirical focus on specific policy issues of the day, and an emphasis on marketing the resulting studies to the broadest possible audience. The Institute's motto, "if it matters, measure it," reflects the belief that through a program of careful measurement, a think tank can provide information that will inform and enlighten public discussion.

Fraser Institute research is informed by the classical liberal tradition of Wilfrid Laurier, who believed in open, competitive, and consumer-oriented markets. We are animated by the same desire to reform institutions that motivated Laurier to proclaim in 1894, two years before he became prime minister, "The good Saxon word, freedom; freedom in every sense of the term, freedom of speech, freedom of action, freedom in religious life and civil life and last but not least, freedom in commercial life."

Become a "go to" source for relevant information

Quite apart from the direct media impact upon the climate of opinion, the Institute's work makes it a "go to" source for information on a wide variety of topics related to government activities.

To use one example, the Fraser Institute publishes annual

report cards on elementary and high schools in every Canadian province for which data is available.

Currently, the Institute publishes evaluations of 5,700 high schools providing education to three million children. These report cards have had a dramatic impact on the discussion about education and the choices parents face when deciding where to send their children for schooling. We know this work is popular because the report cards are downloaded more than one million times from our web site every year. Parents—families—value what the Fraser Institute does, and this is just one example.

Why does the Fraser Institute's work matter?

As the economist Jagdish Bhagwati has noted, economic growth is "a powerful mechanism" to help the poor and peripheral groups. In reference to marginalized groups the world over, Bhagwati wrote that "Unless a growing economy gives women the economic independence to walk out... a battered wife who cannot find a new job is

less likely to take advantage of legislation that says a husband cannot beat his wife; an impoverished parent is unlikely, no matter what the legislation says, to send a child to school if the prospect of finding a job is dismal because of a stagnant economy... economic prosperity is a powerful tool for aiding the poor." What Bhagwati referred to in an international context is what the Fraser Institute seeks to remind everyone of, in Canada and abroad: economic prosperity is critical for families and individuals in Canada and around the world. We invite you to help us do just that, by supporting the critical work of the Fraser Institute. You can learn more about the Fraser Institute by checking out our website at fraserinstitute.org.

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