

Inquiry into Funding for public research into foreign policy issues
Written questions on notice for the Australian Institute of International Affairs

Answers submitted by Bryce Wakefield

Written QoNs from Senator Kitching

- *What is your reaction to perceptions that foreign policy think tanks are pro-status quo (regardless of which party is in power)?*

Like many of the questions below, this really depends on the think tank. In our case, the Australian Institute of International Affairs does not actually take a position of its own. It invites both speakers with status quo opinions and speakers who challenge the regular consensus and are very critical of the government. We think that enhanced knowledge about international affairs is a public good, so we care about having the debate, less so in supporting the messages being espoused by particular speaker. We want people to challenge the status quo. We also want them to defend it. We also host talks that have nothing to do with the position of the Australian government.

- *What measures do you take to ensure the independence, and perception of independence, of your research?*

In our contracts with external parties for events and other projects, we ensure that it is clear that the AIIA is responsible for the direction of project work and selection of speakers. From time to time, funding partners may request particular topics be canvassed or speakers be selected, but the final decision always rests with the AIIA.

Our flagship journal, the *Australian Journal of International Affairs* (AJIA), is answerable to an editorial board that is independent by contract and beholden to clear editorial guidelines. Not even the board of the AIIA can overrule the editorial board of the AJIA. The AJIA is an internationally ranked academic journal whose articles are subjected to a double-blind review process, and thus, the AIIA is the only think tank in Australia that I know of that conducts peer review to a standard that would be immediately recognised in any international academic environment. Other think tanks may say that they conduct peer review, but it is difficult to know what this means. In my experience in my work at think tanks in Washington such “peer review” generally consists of review by an internal council or a paid external reviewer looking over articles the think tank produces. I find that some politicians and journalists often like to use the term “peer review” as though it has some sort of extreme purchase on accuracy, but usually these people would not be able to explain a robust peer-review process and may therefore simply be taking the peer reviewed status of a paper on faith. Even if a paper is peer reviewed according to academic standard, the double-blind process is not without its faults. In any case, it has been established to ensure that a paper is considered of sufficient quality to be considered for academic debate, not that it represents the immutable truth that some lay-commentators take it to mean.

For our other publications, such as Australian Outlook or policy briefs or books that we publish, they are usually reviewed or approved by a committee or an individual such as our research chair, as per the usual think-tank processes described. We do not claim that these are “peer reviewed,” even though they may have been through the same process that others claim as such.

- *Do you take any measures to avoid politicisation of your work?*

At the national level we have a board that oversees the work of my office. State and territory branches, meanwhile, are independent and answerable only to their councils. The board and the various councils all have a fiduciary responsibility to the organisation they variously represent, and all organs of the AIIA have it written into their constitution that the institute and its officers cannot present a view on international affairs that is held to be the view of the institute. The various board and committee members, as well as the staff of this institute take this principle very seriously. While I and certain other members of the organisation may provide expert advice or commentary, we do so as individual experts. No individual view represents that of the institute. Any publication that the AIIA produces contains the view of the author(s) not the institute. As a general principle, we do strive for political diversity, not

because we are trying to avoid “politicisation,” but because knowledge derived from the discussion of issues and the debate between opposing viewpoints constitutes in itself the public good we strive to achieve. We attempt to inform Australians, to help them understand problems of international affairs for themselves, not tell them what to think on a certain issue.

- *Some consider that think tanks focus too much on commentary rather than original research. What is your view?*

I think this is a very odd statement indeed. The entire point of most think tanks is to provide digestible policy advice and information to either policy communities or the general public. Some think tanks conduct and present their original research while others are bridging mechanisms designed to “translate” work in the academic and/or government communities in ways that other communities can understand. Commentary goes with the territory of think tanks and criticising a think tank for producing “commentary” instead of largely focusing on arcane subject matter and storing that within an ivory tower, is, to paraphrase Bilahari Kausikan, asking a cow to be a horse. Think tanks aren’t built to be silent. In any case, Australia could benefit from many more informed experts commenting on international affairs. It’s fairly easy to find people who are not experts commenting on foreign affairs on the media. Informed commentary is what matters.

- *How can foreign policy research be used to shed light on foreign interference?*

There is a role for think tanks in recommending policy advice and challenging current policies. This could extend, for example, to a critique of the foreign influence transparency scheme, which, in my view, has some odd standards for declaring what constitutes “foreign influence.” For example, the Australian Institute of International Affairs has since its founding almost 100 years ago accepted funding from foreign sources. Some of that funding has been for particular projects that the institute has undertaken on its own accord. What it does not do, however, is act “on behalf of” any “foreign principal,” and yet, this is precisely what it is expected to declare when it accepts foreign funding according to poorly written legislation. The AIIA submitted its objection to this legislation when it was being drafted.

That said, while I have an issue with think tanks needing to using borderline accusatory language to register their activities, I have no issue with governments requiring that think tanks register their foreign funding *per se*. Indeed, the Australian Institute of International Affairs declares all its funding from institutional sources, and accepts no anonymous contribution from any individual over \$5,000. It has been recognised in international surveys as the most transparent foreign affairs think tank in Australia. All research institutions could “shed light on foreign influence” simply by being required to list *all* of their institutional contributions and all of their individual contributions to their research up to a certain amount and to state the purpose, if any, for those contributions. Maintaining a similar register as that which currently exists without demanding that think tanks declare their funding as falling into strange categories would be a step in the right direction.

Likewise, prominent Australians have complained to me that their status has required that they are required, when giving a speech at a foreign institution or talking to a foreign media organisation, to register with the scheme using the language outlined above, even when they are not personally accepting funds for such activities. This is patently bizarre, and think tanks have a role in challenging policy that not just overly bureaucratic but rather insidious.