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Politics of evidence: Think tanks and the Academies Act

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Abstract

Previous research has identified political ideology as central in the landmark Academies Act (2010). This article further analyses how politics of evidence played its part in the policy process by focusing on long-term structural changes and preferences among policymakers. The article draws on policymaker interviews after the reform, a mapping of think tanks and a document analysis. The analysis shows that political–ideological preferences were derived from think tanks, and the Conservative manifesto built on skewed Swedish evidence in constructing an argument for the Act. The political choices morphed into fact-based arguments in the policy process. While think tanks had some reservations, in the Whitehall bureaucracy the argument was reformulated as a rational deliberation. This was possible because of the long-term change in the significance of think tanks, and how policymakers preferred politically informed opinions instead of research evidence. The conclusion argues that the evidence-based policy emphasis is an attempt to depoliticise the scope for political arguments. The political dynamic thus results in structurally empowered and layered but depoliticising use of evidence.

KEYWORDS
education policy, England, evidence-based policy, policy advice, think tanks

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Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?
The paper analyses the politics of evidence in the formation of the Academies Act. It focuses on long-term changes and think tanks.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?
Political choices morphed into fact-based arguments in the policy process. Long-term changes in political structures made this possible. Evidence-based policy works to depoliticise the scope of political arguments.

INTRODUCTION

Evidence and policymaking are a difficult match. A substantial body of research shows that policymaking does not favour the critical use of evidence but uses it as an instrument for political–ideological aims rather than as a tool for balanced rational deliberation (e.g. Goldstein, 2008; Stehr & Grundmann, 2012; Craft & Howlett, 2013; Gormley, 2011; Contandriopoulos et al., 2010). Even before evidence is channelled into policymaking, its identification, collection, and selection are problematic for a balanced view (Spillane & Miele, 2007; Piattoeva et al., 2018). It is also fair to say that 'evidence-based policy' is an attempt to label a political process but fails to give a correct image of what is taking place. Theories in political science recognise the value-based starting points of policy instead of evidence. Baumgartner and Jones (2009) start with 'bounded rationality' and analyse the long historical changes at the system level and its agendas. Kingdon (2003) emphasises the roles of policy entrepreneurs and their readiness to push pet proposals at opportune moments, as well as their methods for doing so. The Advocacy Coalition Framework argues that policy coalitions are formed around actors who share the same kind of core beliefs (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). Apart from game-theoretical approaches (e.g. Scharpf, 1997) and rational choice theories (Ostrom, 2005), policy process theories seldom claim rationality as the main driver of decisions. Evidence can be seen as an impetus for change, for example, if an indicator focuses attention on a problem (Zahariadis, 1999), but most theories do not recognise evidence as a key driver of politics but as part of the mix (Head, 2008).

For a policy scholar the ideological nature of policymaking is an expectation that contrasts with policymakers' frequent appeal to evidence. This article argues that the Academies Act (2010) is a prime example of this dynamic. The act and its subsequent reforms have dramatically changed the English education landscape from public to private provision and delivery (Rayner et al., 2018; Salokangas & Ainscow, 2018; West & Bailey, 2013), a systemic change based on *academisation* (Rayner et al., 2018). The first reading of the Act took place on 26 May 2010, 20 days after the general election and only 15 days after the formation of the Cameron–Clegg coalition government, the UK government responsible for English education. It seems its preparation did not happen in Whitehall, but at shadow cabinet meetings and in the Policy Exchange think tank (Simons, 2015, 118).

Ideologically, the academies policy had deep roots. The Conservative party had been reforming its social policy agenda since the late 1990s with the aim of de-bureaucratisation. It then evolved into the 'Big Society' idea (Williams, 2015), which also fitted well with local community involvement in the academies (Hilton, 2018). Hilton (2018, 205, 233) argues that the 'philosophical framework' formed a reform consensus around the academies. For example, the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats had supported liberalism (school autonomy, parental choice and markets) in their manifestos (Hilton, 2018, 33). While

agreeing about the ideological drive, not all agree with the consensus argument. West and Bailey (2013, 153–154) suggest that although the policy goals share similarities, the function of academies has changed from educational support in certain areas (City Technology Colleges) into systemwide change and improving failing schools (sponsored academies). Wiborg (2015, 493) also sees the policy formation as more conflictual because of this turn in the Conservatives' thinking, which started to see academies as a universal education provision. This universalist drive also caused the greatest change, which was the ideological normalisation of privately funded education (Gunter & McGinity, 2014).

In many respects the Academies Act (2010) was a key moment in English education policy, in which a massive change was undertaken with limited evidence and a strongly ideological drive. The ideological nature of the reform was clear in how the evidence repeatedly pointed in another direction. Research on the reform's evidence base suggests that it was exaggerated or even false throughout the long lifespan of the reform. The preceding experiences with the academies, first introduced by the Labour government, did not fulfil the claims for learning outcomes (Gorard, 2005, 2009). The situation had not changed when the coalition government took office, but this did not prevent the white paper (DfE, 2010b) that followed the Academies Act from devising a systemwide change, drawing on selective evidence that aimed at legitimation (Morris, 2012). The results of the act did not match the political expectations. One leading idea of the act was that groups in disadvantaged areas would establish new schools, but the process ultimately helped advantaged actors (Higham, 2014), and after 5 years of operation the free schools enabled by the act are selective and reproduce inequalities (Allen & Higham, 2018). Instead of systematic research, using Head's (2008) categories, the evidence seemed to be political judgement and partly practice. In combining the different types of evidence, think tanks have been important for the academies policy.

Think tanks are strongly networked with education policymakers (Exley, 2014). Think tanks help externalise thinking through kite flying, attracting support, overcoming intra-governmental competition or crossing departmental boundaries to work on broad questions, for example (Schlesinger, 2009, 17–18). They also provide career paths for politicians, officials and advisory staff (Schlesinger, 2009, 11). Their definition is not always clear, as some are not labelled as think tanks (Denham & Garnett, 2013 [1996]). Stone (2000, 153) defines think tanks as research organisations that aim to actively exert political influence, which is a sufficiently proximate understanding to summarise how this article approaches these organisations. They work in a messy policy, idea and influence network (Stone, 2007). Exley (2014, 182) shows that the Policy Exchange think tank was involved in the agenda formulation of the academies policy. The narratives of those in the thick of it (Simons, 2015; O'Shaughnessy's quote in Hilton, 2018, 132) indicate that think tanks were central to the formulation of the Academies Act. This would fit well with how politically ideological the Academies Act is in contrast with the research evidence, as think tanks' mixing of policy and ideas has contributed to the politicisation of science (Jacques et al., 2014; Plehwe, 2014). Think tanks seem to be a useful tool for the mingling of political judgement and other evidence.

To summarise the starting points, it therefore seems clear that my premise should not be to expect a rational policy process but to seek to analyse how an argument is formed through the political process. The specific task is therefore to understand how politics, political–ideological preferences and judgement guided the planning and initial implementation of the Academies Act (2010), and what the role of think tanks in this was. I will start by tracking the long-term change in how evidence for policymaking is provided and expert advice is understood, and how the mingling of political ideas and evidence at such a rapid pace for a lucrative policy argument in the Academies Act became possible. This is done with the aid of previous research and new data. In the conclusion I develop an argument concerning how evidence-based policy is used to veil political arguments.

FOCUSING ON THINK TANK EVIDENCE IN THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF EDUCATION POLICYMAKING

According to Craft and Howlett (2013) the main changes in policy advice lie in externalisation and politicisation: the former process is related to the new actors, and the latter to the type of advice that is given within the government. Similar trends are present in the history of the UK government, which is responsible for English education policy. Whitehall's ideal of a bureaucratically neutral model is based on the notion that the civil service is a profession with unified, permanent and largely non-political appointees, generalist rather than technical high officials and bureaucrats who, unlike their ministers, are not politically accountable (Wilson & Barker, 1995, 131–132). This model has always attracted criticism and has never existed as such, but there has nevertheless been a striving for a politically neutral and sensitive civil service (Barberis, 2012). The model's shift to externalisation and politicisation was well described by an outgoing Cabinet Secretary: 'We no longer claim a monopoly over policy advice. Indeed we welcome the fact that we are much more open to ideas from think tanks, consultancies, governments abroad, special advisers, and frontline practitioners' (Turnbull, 2005). The same change in advice also crept into education policy.

The long-term trend is breaking the post-war consensus with politicising research evidence and finding new advice outside Whitehall. After the Second World War and until the 1960s, 'professional bureaucracy' easily found partners in university education research (Byrne & Ozga, 2008, 390). Changes were introduced when criticism started to arise after the 1960s. Various governments were dissatisfied with the type of advice or with bureaucratic inflexibility. According to the 1968 Fulton Committee report, for example, the civil service was amateurish and uninterested in management (Wilson & Barker, 2003, 351). Relations between academic research and Whitehall became more complex, and the seemingly consensual relationship broke down (Byrne & Ozga, 2008). A strong signal of the intention to dissolve the post-war education policy consensus was channelled in the so-called Black Papers in 1969–1977, which expressed Conservative dissatisfaction with Labour education policy (Jones, 2003, 100–105). The 1980s and 1990s saw the disaggregation of departmental governance into executive agencies and a further reaggregation through mergers, the result being to shift powers from the classic bureaucracy to more managerially run entities (Elston, 2012; Flinders, 2002; Talbot & Johnson, 2007). This was during the tenure of Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1979–1990), when the political advice received by her cabinet shifted to political appointees, special advisers and right-wing think tanks (James, 1986; Lewis, 2011; Yong, 2014). A preference for 'instinct and common sense' replaced expertise during both Thatcher's and Major's premierships (Green, 2014). Exley (2014, 181) describes how the Department of Education and Science was deliberately encouraged to break the Whitehall consensus model by Margaret Thatcher, Keith Joseph and Kenneth Baker. Hiring political advisers from think tanks was a means to this end, and many key education reformers worked in them (Exley, 2014, 182).

Think tanks started to play a larger role in prominent policy reforms. Tony Blair's New Labour government placed increasing trust in external advice (Schlesinger, 2009), and secretaries of state for education were suspicious of the usefulness of academic education research (Whitty, 2006). Simultaneously, the rhetorical shift to using evidence in policymaking took root at the turn of the millennium (Davies et al., 2000). Instead of academic evidence, think tanks became more important. They actively re-narrated the Labour Party as it moved towards its election victory, with education as one of its platform's centrepieces (Pautz, 2010), and the party continued to listen to them when in power (Whitty, 2006, 167–168). The Conservative Party sharpened its populist tone on education during the 2000s, creating oppositions between education experts and their establishments and the people represented by the party (Craske, 2021). The description by Michael Gove, the Secretary

of State for Education (2010–2014) who implemented the Academies Act (2010), of education experts as 'a blob' opposing reform exemplifies the diminishing importance of external policy experts, and specifically academics, to politicians (Green, 2014; Simons, 2015). This populist Conservative policy was opposed to quangos, or quasi-departmental public bodies, which Gove and Cameron saw as elitist or bastions of ideology (Craske, 2021).

In line with this article's focus, the role of think tanks in the Academy Act process has been seen as important. The then head of the Policy Exchange think tank, Jonathan Simons, says that Education Secretary Gove had 'a private draft of what would become the Academies Act sitting in a safe', and while in the shadow cabinet developed policies 'including much originally conceived within Policy Exchange' (Simons, 2015, 118). Hilton's interviews with policymakers documents that Policy Exchange and Swedish evidence were key sources of Gove's idea. Both accounts partly differ from a House of Commons Library research paper (Gillie & Bolton, 2010), which states that the ideas for the legislation were based on the Conservative manifesto. As the networks of think tanks are overlapping and broad, and as there are connections between the Conservative Party and many of the right-leaning think tanks, it is fair to assume that these ideas were developed in this broader policy community. Hence, it would be worthwhile to concretely track the formulations and origins of the ideas of this major reform.

I draw on Palonen's (1993, 2003) Weberian notion of politics as a way of acting differently, finding room for action. This has led me to think that politics is a means to reorganise contingency, which can be understood in three dimensions loosely following Palonen's (2006) topoi of contingency: what is opportune in a specific political situation; what is politicised and thus seen as possible; and how actors can capitalise on these (Kauko, 2014). Here opportunities refer to the political actor structure, politicisation to what is being debated, and capitalisation to how political actors act given the opportunities and politicisations—the combination of the three dimensions can be described as political dynamics (e.g. Kauko, Takala, et al., 2018). These three dimensions are operationalised in tasks to unfold how the politics of evidence via think tanks was formed in setting up the Academies Act:

- To understand the opportunity for think tanks to contribute to the discussion, I will contextualise how the think tank scenery had changed in relation to other types of advisory body.
- To understand what kind of evidence was available, and how it became politicised, I will map the relevant evidence from the think tank landscape during the time of the reform predating the Conservative manifesto.
- To understand how actors capitalised on the available politicised evidence, I will compare it with the Conservative manifesto and its legacy in the Academies Act.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL DYNAMICS

I draw on three sets of data that are used side by side. The first set comprises 14 theme interviews with key policymakers in the UK, with a focus on education policy in England. The second is think tank data compiled from multiple online sources. The third dataset includes various government and think tank documents.

I carried out 13 interviews alone or with Jenny Ozga. These were conducted in 2013, soon after the Academies Act was enacted (2010). The quotations are coded only with the group identifiers 'politician', 'official', and 'stakeholder' to protect the interviewees' identity. Five of the six politicians (two Conservatives, one crossbencher, two Labour, and one Liberal Democrat) worked or had worked in one or both Houses of Parliament, two had held office as Secretary of State for Education, and one had had an influential position at

the national level when working in local government. Of the three interviewed officials none was currently in office, two had a Department for Education background, and the third had a strong background in local government. The four education policy stakeholders held senior education-related positions in various organisations: a trade union; a regional inspection service provider; a national newspaper; and a religious community (involved in education provision). Some of the interviewees had an Ofsted/HMI background, two with the designation of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools. There were five women and eight men among the interviewees. The use of interview data and interviewees' rights were discussed and agreed with the participants. One interviewee requested and was given the opportunity to check the quotations before publication. In addition to the data I collected, I used a published interview with Sir Michael Barber (2014) conducted by Jenny Ozga, bringing the total number of interviews to 14.

Interviewing the powerful, the category into which the interviewees of this research fall, requires a special approach to gaining access and receiving relevant data, and various techniques from 'diffusing authority' (Conti & O'Neil, 2007) to rigorous preparation. The theme interviews were heavily tailored for each interviewee and followed a frame based on three areas: actors; dynamics; and the future (see Kauko, Centeno, et al., 2018). In the part of the interview dealing with actors the interviewees were asked to estimate the role and position of various organisations in the field of education policymaking. When the discussion turned to dynamics, they were encouraged to analyse the main change processes and trajectories in English education policy. They were also asked briefly to reflect on future developments and challenges. In each theme the follow-up questions focused on the change in the relations and positions of different actors. While the interviews did not directly aim to reflect the politics of evidence in the Academies Act, it was a theme that ran through them owing to their timely political relevance and the general nature of the questions. I started the analysis by summarising the interview text in short statements, which I organised under broader recurring themes such as teacher professionalism, policymaking, data governance and local–central relations. The interpretation and arguments used in this article are derived from the three first themes and are contextualised by the fourth (cf. Kauko & Salokangas, 2015). Following a further reading of the interview transcripts, I developed a closer focus on think tanks.

The data on think tanks drew on the Wikipedia page 'List of think tanks in the United Kingdom' in 2014 (Wikipedia, 2014), crosschecked with other online think tank lists (Harvard Kennedy School Library & Knowledge Services, 2013, Telegraph, 2008, Guardian, 2013), and updated in 2020 (Wikipedia, 2014). The nature of the data collection meant there was a chance that currently active think tanks would be favoured, without the perspective of disbanded pre-internet organisations. Nevertheless, it is fair to argue that in the 2010s think tanks could be expected to be found online, and that any skews in the data lay in the historical part. A research assistant and I accessed the respective websites to gain additional information about activity, area of interest and political affiliation. If information on the exact date of foundation was unavailable, the date of its first publication was used, or in a very few cases as a final resort unconfirmed data such as the Wikipedia entry. In some cases we resorted to internet archive sites such as web.archive.org. As a result, 18 think tanks were excluded, because they were clearly only research institutes with no extensive outreach, they did not function in the UK or they did not provide enough information about their work. The final sample consisted of 163 think tanks, 158 of which are still operating (Appendix A1).

The documentary material was collected from online sources in 2014 and 2021. It contains public records such as the annual Public Bodies reports and specific documents related to policy advice on the Academies Act. As the analysis progressed, it was necessary to analyse various documents produced by the think tanks and by external actors such as the Swedish National Agency for Education.

POLITY CHANGE: ENTER THINK TANKS, EXIT QUANGOS

The data illustrate the growth of the think tank scene. While some education think tanks have a long history (the Fabian Society was founded in 1884), it was only as the Academies Act reform approached that they became commonplace. The founding of education think tanks occurred a little after the rapid growth in the number of think tanks, with steady growth from the 1990s. This is milder growth than the general almost threefold increase in the number of think tanks since the late 1980s (Figure 1). Of the 163 think tanks in the sample, only 18 describe themselves as political–ideologically affiliated (nine centre-left or left, six Conservative or right, one Green), and the rest claim to be independent, non-partisan, all-party or cross-party, or do not make such information available. Progressive think tanks were categorised as centre-left, and libertarian as right wing (Appendix A1). Thirteen think tanks focus solely on education, and 18 partly (with other policies in the main focus list).

One official working at the time in one of the think tanks saw their expansion as coupled with the shift to a more instrumental and political–ideological use of knowledge, suggesting that it brought more 'conviction politics' into the political debate and occupied a space vacated by the universities:

> If you look at the history of think tanks in the UK, I suppose there's sort of, they started to really mushroom in the late 1970s and 1980s on the right, and on the neoliberal right. … They were in the business of radical confrontation with what they saw as the established opinions of professions, universities, and others. And think tanks played … the right-wing neoliberal think tanks played an important role in that they drove through a kind of conviction politics. … And so, I think

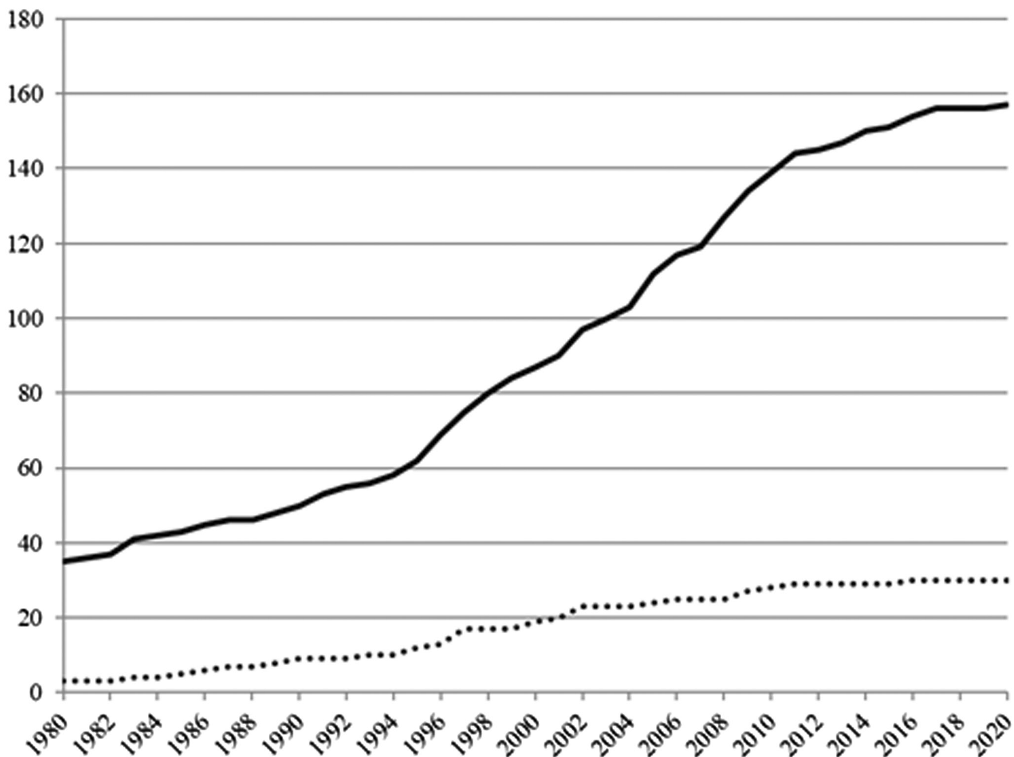

FIGURE 1 All (solid line) and education (dotted line) think tanks in the UK.

> in the 1980s a process did start which widened the gap between academia and government, and into that gap think tanks came. (Official)

What the interviewee describes accords with the general picture drawn from the research in the previous section. However, the increase in the number of think tanks can be compared with another change in the polity. At the same time as the number of think tanks was growing, the Department for Education's landscape of non-departmental public bodies changed radically. These bodies are also commonly called *quangos*, or quasi-non-governmental organisations. The data in Figure 2 cover the period between 1990 and 2014, showing how the landscape changed with executive and advisory non-departmental public bodies (Cabinet Office, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2013, 2014). The difference between the two types of body is that the latter are closer to a government department 'typically stabled in statute and carrying out executive, administrative, regulatory and/or commercial functions', whereas the former 'provide independent, expert advice to ministers' (Cabinet Office, 2013). At the end of 2014 the number of think tanks was almost the same as the number of advisory bodies.

The narrative in the interviews supports the statistical data in that many influential organisations or groups previously functioning in education were abolished or became insignificant as sources of policy advice, while the role of think tanks became more important. One politician pointed out that the Department for Education no longer had advisory bodies that could change policy:

> The Department in the 60s, 70s, 80s, had a network of advisory bodies from outside. It had advisory bodies on funding, it had advisory bodies on the teacher training, it had advisory bodies on teacher numbers. … There are many, many fewer, and most of them are now very tightly controlled by the Department in

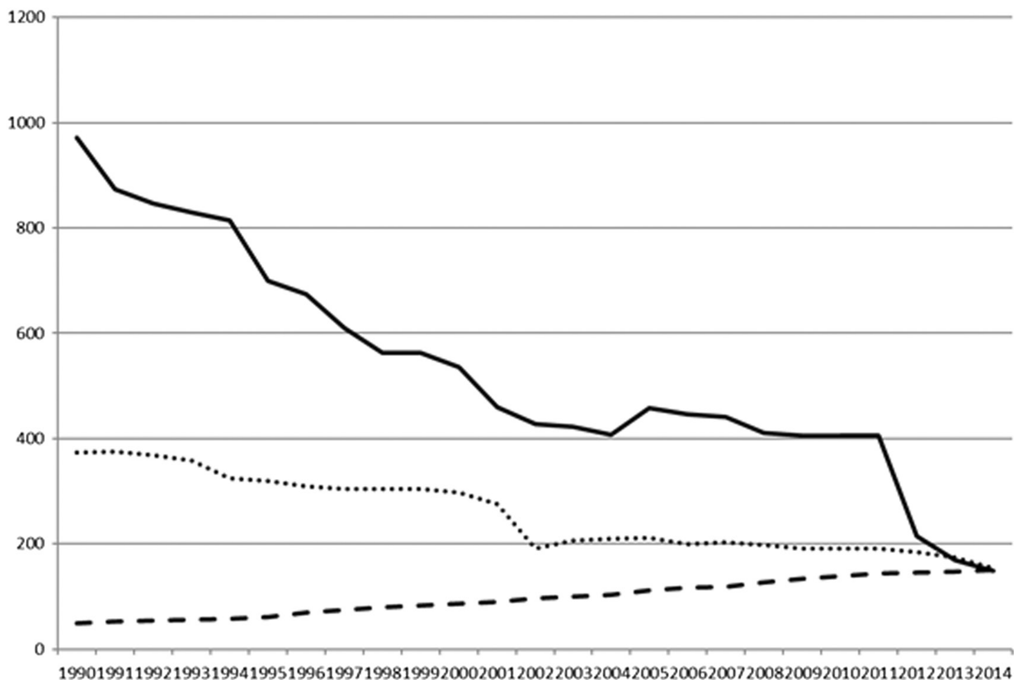

FIGURE 2 The number of think tanks (dashed line) and executive (dotted line) and advisory (solid line) non-departmental public bodies in the UK.

a way that they were not before, they were genuine advisory bodies that could change government policy. (Politician, Conservative)

The above quotation reflects the qualitative nature of the change in advice given in addition to the structural change, in that the former advisory bodies could influence decisions. A closer look at the trends in the Department for Education and its predecessors (Table 1) reveals the same: the number of advisory bodies was slashed by two-thirds during the 20 years preceding the Academies Act (Cabinet Office, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2013, 2014). There was a turning point in 2011, with a decrease in the number of non-departmental public bodies. There was an instant change when the coalition government (2010–2015) took office, which can be seen as indicative of the stance towards the utility of these bodies. Later, as part of its reform programme, the government gave ministers powers to abolish, merge and change certain public bodies (Public Bodies Act, 2011), and the Education Act (2011) abolished five non-departmental public bodies.

The interviewees identified the side-lining of other advisory bodies, and the ascendancy of a more instrumental and political view of knowledge. The interviewees were in clear agreement that the glory days of some advisory organisations were over. Universities and trade unions seemed to play a less important role. Policymakers tended to prefer personal connections to formal institutional links. Although the interviewees named some good contacts, mainly from the universities of Cambridge and Oxford, what one politician said was indicative of the mood: 'I don't think research influences education and practice as much as I think it should do. There hasn't been as strong a relationship between politicians and researchers in education as there perhaps is in other departments' (politician, Labour). Another reason for the declining influence of universities mentioned by one official was that the academic discussion could not keep pace with policymaking: the 'outcomes of the research are too slow to shape the debate' (official). Other stakeholders such as trade unions had also lost their significance in the interviewees' understanding (see also Barber, 1992 and Jones, 2003, 158). According to some views the unions had been completely marginalised during the previous 20 years (stakeholder) or taken over by 'Trotskyites' (official). The officials and politicians had the impression that they were merely being shouted at during the trade union conferences, and that the overall policy was to oppose reform, or as Barber formulates it, they were 'obsessed with running a critique of government policy' (Barber, 2014, 83). However, the unions were thought to have influence in consultative groups (stakeholder) and on agenda setting (stakeholder).

In contrast, the interviewees suggested think tanks had an ideology-boosting effect on policymaking. They thought the influence depended on how close the government in power was to their political stand, and on whether there was a 'commonality of interest' in a certain agenda (official). Politicians also recognised this political–ideological linkage: 'I think the ministers pay attention to what the think tanks of their persuasion do. The Labour government would've listened to the IPPR, the Conservative government listens to its more right-wing think tanks' (politician, Conservative). A stakeholder raised the example of a free-school-supporting network as a warning of how politically connected organisations were falsely portrayed as apolitical and independent (stakeholder).[1]

To summarise, just after the Academies Act (2010), aligned with what the statistics gathered from the documents reveal, the interviewees pointed out that both the advisory bodies and the advice given by external organisations such as universities or trade unions had lost many degrees of influence on policymaking. Supporting the statistical data, the interview data imply at the very least that the distancing of policymaking from bureaucratic-professional advice created a possibility to move towards a decision-making structure tinged by political ideology.

TABLE 1 The numbers of non-departmental public bodies at the Department for Education (2010–2015), the Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007–2010), the Department for Education and Skills (2001–2007) and the Department for Education and Employment (1997–1998, 2000)

	1997	1998	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Advisory	4	5	7	1	1	1	2	3	3	3	3	4	4	3	1	2	2	2
Executive	15	14	12	10	11	12	13	16	17	17	8	9	10	10	2	5	5	1
Other	2	2	3	3	3	2	2	4	3	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Total	21	21	22	14	15	15	17	23	23	20	11	13	15	14	3	7	7	3

ARGUING FOR ACADEMIES WITH SWEDISH EVIDENCE

As there is no access to the draft legislation and its formulation, the presumption of my analysis has been that at least some preparatory work for the Conservative manifesto and the government bill took place in think tanks. In this respect, in attempting to understand the reasoning behind the Act, it is worth discovering whether the ideas in the 2010 Conservative manifesto are correlated with those of the think tanks.

The Conservative manifesto of 2010 comprised 131 pages, of which four were devoted to education. One of these four pages contains an illustration and just one paragraph of text about Swedish free schools (Conservative Party, 2010, 50), and another discusses independent state-funded schools (ISFS), drawing on Swedish and US examples. It is pointed out in the short section on Sweden that Swedish free schools have better discipline and higher standards, and the same idea is repeated as a general result of ISFS: ‘Our schools revolution will create a new generation of good small schools with smaller class sizes and high standards of discipline’ (Conservative Party, 2010, 53). Many specific means, especially those related to allowing freedom and choice, were considered to contribute to achieving these aims.

According to their online list of publications four education-related think tanks in the database published policy papers related to academies before the Academies Act came into force: Civitas (2008), *Swedish lessons*; Centreforum (2008), *Academies and the future state of education*; Reform (2008), *Academies: A model education*; and Policy Exchange (2009), *A guide to school choice reforms* and (2010), *Blocking the best: Obstacles to new, independent state schools*, the latter just a month before the release of the manifesto.[2] I analyse these further in comparison with the Conservative manifesto, examining the key aims of the ISFS reform in general and in the Swedish context: discipline; standards; and small school or class sizes. Table 2 summarises the results.

The general arguments set out in the Conservative manifesto concerning the higher standards of Swedish free schools, or ISFS, are reflected in all the think tank publications. Those concerning better discipline are present in the manifesto, both Policy Exchange reports and the Reform report. The idea expressed in the manifesto that an ISFS system would contribute to smaller school sizes is mentioned only in the Reform report. Leaving aside the

TABLE 2 Ideas in the Conservative Manifesto (2010) and in four think tanks on academies and free schools

The Conservative Party (2010)	Civitas (2008)	Centreforum (2008)	Reform (2008)	Policy Exchange (2009)	Policy Exchange (2010)
Swedish free schools have better discipline	–	–	–	Yes (pp. 55, 27)	–
Swedish free schools have higher standards	Yes (p. xvi)	Reservations (p. 84)	–	Reservations (p. 26)	–
ISFSs contribute to better discipline	–	–	Yes (pp. 5, 37)	Yes (pp. 45, 55)	Yes (p. 68)
ISFSs contribute to higher standards	–	Yes (p. 82)	Yes, (pp. 6, 25)	Yes (p. 55)	Implicitly (p. 72)
ISFSs contribute to smaller school or class sizes	–	–	Yes (p. 37)	–	–

Abbreviation: ISFS, Independent state-funded school.

argument related to smaller school or class sizes, the only document that includes all the relevant points of the Conservative manifesto is the Policy Exchange (2009) report.

Interestingly, Centreforum and Policy Exchange express reservations about the higher standards in Swedish schools: the former adds the qualifier ‘so economic theory predicts’ (Centreforum, 2008, 84), whereas the latter is almost apologetic: ‘As competition increases its impact on performance is likely to become significantly more pronounced’ (Policy Exchange, 2009, 26). In the other Policy Exchange (2010, 72) report the claim is made implicitly in the general opinion ‘Many academies are oversubscribed due to their reputation for achieving excellent results’. However, Policy Exchange (2009, 25) and Civitas, 2008, xvi) also directly claim that Sweden's independent state-funded schools perform better, drawing on *Skolverket* (Swedish National Agency for Education) statistics showing a 20-point higher national score at the end of compulsory schooling. The Civitas report (2008, xvi) also includes a particular case on the city of Nacka, a neighbouring municipality of Stockholm, drawing on what was later heavily contested (Bunar, 2010, 12) evidence from a discussion paper by researchers from the Swedish Institute for Social Research (Böhlmark & Lindahl, 2007).

To show how important this argument is, it is noteworthy that the claim about outperforming Swedish free schools is repeated in two white papers published after the bill, which do not refer to the think tank documents mentioned above but could be understood as justifying the chosen policy already implemented under the Academies Act:

> Likewise, in Sweden, Free Schools have higher achievement than other schools, having higher average points scores than state schools in most subjects, a higher proportion of pupils eligible to progress on to upper secondary education and having more pupils progress to higher education. (DfE, 2010a, 21)

> In Sweden, pupils who attend state-funded independent Free Schools outperform those in other state schools and a higher proportion (eight per cent more) go on to higher education. (DfE, 2010b, 51)

Both documents cite the same reference to Sweden's official statistics, or ‘Sveriges Officiella Statistik (, 2009)—accessed online’, as the Civitas and Policy Exchange reports. At the time of writing the link given had expired. However, the information matches statistics from the 2007–2008 school year, which were the latest available in 2009 (Skolverket, 2009). In these data Table 11B (Skolverket, 2009, 144) shows that 48.1% of pupils moved on to higher education in the autumn of 2008 within 3 years of graduating from a free school. This rate was better than the then average of 40.6%, matching the white paper's figures well.

However, the claim of outperformance is not entirely justified. In Skolverket's data—specifically, table 2a (Skolverket, 2009, 65)—the test results are divided between the upper secondary programmes and the free schools. Hence, the categories are the national, special and individual programmes, and free schools. Individual programmes basically comprise Special Educational Needs education, accounting for only 552 of the total of 92,615 pupils, and an average score of 9.8 out of 20. Pupils in the national programme (64,470) scored 13.9, those in the special programme (13,174) scored 14.4 and graduates of free schools (14,479) scored 14.3. In this sense, pupils at free schools outperformed only those in national and individual programmes. In any case, the free school outperformance of the national average (14.0) was 0.4 in scores out of 20.

The use of Swedish evidence in the policy documents and think tank reports highlights two interesting aspects. First, statistical arguments gave way to political–ideological arguments in each document. The think tank documents presupposed that the scores would

improve once the ISFS model was dominant. In turn, the white papers produced no definitive evidence from Skolverket but instead aligned it with a similar argument already formed in the think tank documents and the manifesto. Second, given the lack of references in the Conservative manifesto, it is difficult to claim a causal relationship with the think tank reports, but the causality is highlighted by those involved (Simons, 2015, 118), and the movement of people is somewhat indicative of this like-mindedness. Gove was one of the founders of Policy Exchange, and two former think tank workers served in his department as special advisers: Sam Freedman was the main author of the Policy Exchange (2009) report and Henry de Zoete had worked in the Reform think tank. These were the two think tanks closest to the ideas presented in the Conservative manifesto. The author of the Centreforum (2008) report, Julian Astle, worked as a special adviser to the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg.[3] Apart from Civitas, the flow of the Swedish evidence in the documents finds direct support in the roles of the main actors.

CONCLUSION: STRUCTURALLY EMPOWERED AND LAYERED BUT DEPOLITICISING USE OF EVIDENCE

The conclusion here is that the political dynamic in English education policy has changed in the long term to allow a greater role for think tanks producing politically and ideologically driven argumentation. This change was opportune because of the long-term increase in the number of think tanks to almost the same level as the reduced number of non-departmental public bodies. This was reflected in the interviewees' observations on the growing importance of politically informed opinions in current policymaking. The analysis above argues that think tanks structurally replaced some advisory functions previously carried out by universities and expert organisations. The many studies critical of the results of the academies policy without a significant impact indicates that the research evidence has been side-lined from the political programme, which marks a shift in the political discourse and what has been understood as possible or important (politicisation). Instead of the expert and academic networks, the vivid network of policy advisers, think tanks and politicians seems to have been influential. Indeed, an important part of the political dynamic here is the structurally empowered politics of evidence.

This dynamic unfolded more when policy actors started to capitalise on the evidence in the prevailing situation: evidence use faced the various layers of governance, and ideologically motivated political arguments became intertwined with rationally formulated arguments such as statistics. The Swedish evidence lived through and morphed throughout the process. When think tanks looked for suitable evidence, they turned to Sweden with existing cases of free schools for reference. In this layer the aim of the evidence use was to find grounds for a grand reform in England. While the think tanks remained partly reflective of the aspects of the discipline and performance of independent state-funded schools, the Conservative manifesto ignored any reservations, because its purpose for evidence use differed: to convince voters of the manifested party ideology. The most interesting metamorphosis of evidence took place when the ideas of the manifesto and think tanks were introduced to the Whitehall bureaucratic process. While the think tanks could offer ideological arguments and display some of them with reservations, the white papers, supposedly prepared by officials, sustained the manifesto-style skewed interpretation of the Swedish evidence on learning outcomes with a rationalistic tone. At this stage any doubt was neutralised to present a non-negotiable stand in the white papers about the next steps of the reform. In other words, the old Whitehall-style neutrality still worked as a layer in the final stages of policy, but the preparatory phase of legislation in this case veered towards external political–ideological think tank preparation, and a depoliticising tone was used to cover this.

Overall, the political dynamic can be described as structurally empowered and layered but depoliticising use of evidence.

The long-term emphasis on evidence-based policy, proven unattainable by many researchers, has apparently taken root as a rhetorical resource to counter opposing views. The evidence-based policy perspective attempts to depoliticise the scope for ideological and political arguments by curtailing them as rationalism. What is interesting here is that it is neither the think tank papers nor the election manifesto that assumes this curtailing role, but the Whitehall process. This makes sense, because the input from the preparatory bodies has dramatically changed or ceased, but if the depoliticisation is successful, it limits public critical deliberation on education policy after elections.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author does not report any conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The think tank database of this study is openly available in Zenodo at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6303728. The documentary data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Interview data are not shared due to privacy and ethical restrictions (Kauko, 2022).

ETHICAL GUIDELINES

The research has been conducted under the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity. The identity of the interviewees is protected through coding quotations only with the group identifiers.

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ENDNOTES

[1] A few years before the interviews took place there were allegations in the press based on leaked emails regarding the political bias of a formally independent charity (The Guardian, 2011, TES, 2010), although they were unrelated to the think tanks behind the network. The New Schools Network is not considered a think tank in this study, because it does not produce research.

[2] Policy Exchange (2009b) also published *Building Blocks? An Investigation into Building Schools for the Future*, but its section on academy and free schools draws on the previous publication (Policy Exchange 2009a), and it is omitted from the analysis because of this overlap. Politeia also published a report called 'A Free Schools Future' in 1995, but this was unavailable on the website http://www.politeia.co.uk/publications/publications-archive-education. In any case, this document is unlikely to be relevant to the 2010 Act.

[3] Conor Ryan was an adviser in previous governments to Prime Minister Tony Blair and Secretary of State for Education David Blunkett.

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APPENDIX

List of think tanks in the sample

Name	Year established (disbanded or merged)	Specific education emphasis	Ideology
2020 Health	2006	No	Not mentioned
Adam Smith Institute	1977	No	Non-partisan
Africa Research Institute	2007	No	Non-partisan
BioCentre	1984	No	Not mentioned
Bow Group	1951	No	Conservative
Boyd Group	1992	No	Non-partisan
Brand EU	2014	No	Not mentioned
Bright Blue	2010	Partly	Conservative
British American Security Information Council[a]	1995	No	Non-partisan
British Future[a]	2012	No	Non-partisan
British Institute of International and Comparative Law	1958	No	Non-partisan
Bruges Group	1989	No	All-party
Building and Social Housing Foundation	1976	No	Independent
CANZUK International	2015	No	Non-partisan
Catalyst	1998 (2004)	No	Leftist
Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion	1997	Partly	Not mentioned
Centre for Cities	2005	No	Non-partisan
Centre for Cross Border Studies	1999	No	Not mentioned
Centre for Defence and International Security Studies	1990	No	Non-partisan
Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion[a]	1997 (2016)	No	Not mentioned
Centre for Economic Policy Research	1983	No	Independent
Centre for European Reform[a]	1996	No	Non-partisan
Centre for Policy Studies	1974	No	Non-partisan
Centre for Social Justice	2004	No	Independent

Name	Year established (disbanded or merged)	Specific education emphasis	Ideology
Centre for Strategic Research and Analysis (CESRAN)	2008	No	Non-partisan
Centre for the Economics of Education	2000 (2010)	Yes	Not mentioned
Centre for the New Midlands	2020	No	Not mentioned
Centre for Welfare Reform	2009	no	Independent
CentreForum[a]	2006	Yes	Independent
Chatham House	1920	No	Independent
City Mayors Foundation	2003	No	Independent
CIVITAS	2000	Yes	Non-partisan
Cobden Centre	2008	Yes	Independent
Common Weal	2013	No	Non-partisan
Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit	1949	No	Not mentioned
Compass	1998	No	Labour
Constitution Society	2009	Partly	Non-partisan
Constitution Unit	1995	No	Independent
Cordoba Foundation	2005	No	Independent
Cornerstone Group	2005	No	Conservative
Credos	2010	No	Not mentioned
Defence Synergia	2010	No	Non-partisan
Demos[a]	1993	Partly	Cross-party
Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC)	1998	No	Not mentioned
E3G	2004	No	Non-partisan
Economists for Free Trade	N/A	No	Conservative
Education Policy Institute	2016	Yes	Non-partisan
Ekklesia	2002	No	Independent
Electoral Reform Society	1884	No	Independent
European Council on Foreign Relations	2007	No	Independent
European Policy Forum	1992	No	Not mentioned
Fabian Society	1884	Partly	Leftist
Foreign Policy Centre	1998	No	Independent
Forum for the Future	1996	No	Independent
Global Ideas Bank	1985	Partly	Non-partisan
Global Warming Policy Foundation	2009	No	All-party
Global Vision[a]	2008	No	Non-partisan
Gold Mercury International	1961	No	Independent
Green Alliance	1979	No	Independent
Green House Think Tank[a]	2011	No	Green party
Halsbury's Law Exchange[a]	2010	No	Not mentioned
Hansard Society	1944	No	Non-partisan
Health Foundation	1983	no	Non-partisan
Higher Education Policy Institute	2002	Yes	Independent

Name	Year established (disbanded or merged)	Specific education emphasis	Ideology
Independent Transport Commission	1999	No	Independent
Initiave For Free Trade	2017	No	Non-partisan
Innovation Unit	2002	Yes	Independent
Institute For Employment Studies	1969	No	Non-partisan
Institute for Fiscal Studies	1969	No	Independent
Institute for Government[a]	2008	No	Cross-party
Institute for Jewish Policy Research[a]	1996	No	Independent
Institute for Public Policy Research	1986	Partly	Independent
Institute for Strategic Dialogue	2006	No	Independent
Institute of Development Studies	1966	No	Not mentioned
Institute of Economic Affairs	1955	No	Independent
Institute of Race Relations	1972	No	Independent
Institute of Welsh Affairs	1987	Partly	Independent
International Growth Centre	2008	No	Non-partisan
International Institute for Environment and Development	1971	No	Not mentioned
International Institute for Strategic Studies	1958	No	Non-partisan
International Longevity Centre—UK[a]	2003	No	Independent
International Policy Network	1971 (2011)	No	Not mentioned
Involve[a]	2005	No	Non-partisan
Jimmy Reed Foundation	2011	No	Left-wing
Joseph Rowntree Foundation[a]	1994	No	Independent
Jubilee Centre	1983	No	Not mentioned
King's Fund	1897	No	Independent
Learning and Work Institute	2016	Yes	Independent
Legatum Institute	2011	No	Independent
Local Government Information Unit	1983	Partly	All-party
Localis	2001	No	Independent
LSE IDEAS	2008	No	Not mentioned
MigrationWatch UK	2008	No	Independent
Million+	1997	Yes	Non-partisan
Mutuo	2001	No	Not mentioned
National Institute of Economic and Social Research	1938	No	Independent
Nesta	1998	No	Independent
New City Initiative	2010	No	Independent
New Economics Foundation	1986	No	Independent
New Local Government Network	1996	Partly	Not mentioned
New Philanthropy Capital	2002	No	Independent
New Policy Institute[a]	1996	No	Not mentioned
New Politics Network	1999 (2007)	No	Left-wing
Next Century Foundation	1990	No	Independent

Name	Year established (disbanded or merged)	Specific education emphasis	Ideology
Nuffield Council on Bioethics	1991	No	Independent
Nuffield Trust	1940	No	Independent
Official Monetary and Financial Institutions Forum	2010	No	Independent
One World Trust	1951	No	Independent
Open Europe	2005	No	Independent
Overseas Development Institute	1960	No	Independent
Oxford Research Group	1982	No	Independent
Oxonia, the Oxford Institute for Economic Policy[a]	2003	No	Independent
Polar Research and Policy Initiative	2016	No	Independent
Police Foundation	1996	No	Independent
Policy Connect	1995	Partly	All-party
Policy Exchange	2002	Yes	Independent
Policy Network[a]	2002	No	Centre-left
Policy Studies Institute	1931	No	Independent
Politeia	1995	Partly	Not mentioned
Population Matters (formerly known as the Optimum Population Trust)	1991	No	Not mentioned
Progress	1996	No	Labour
Quilliam[a]	2009	No	Independent
RAND Europe	1948	Partly	Independent
Re-Define[b]	2008	No	Independent
Reform	2001	Yes	Non-partisan
Renewable Energy Foundation	2004	No	Non-partisan
Resolution Foundation	2005	No	Non-partisan
ResPublica	2009	No	Non-partisan
Reuters Institute	2006	No	Not mentioned
Royal Air Force Centre for Air Power Studies[b]	2007	No	RAF
Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies	1831	No	Independent
Science Policy Research Unit	1966	No	Independent
Scotland's Futures Forum[a]	2005	Partly	All-party
Scottish Constitutional Commission	2005	No	Non-partisan
Scottish Global Forum	2013	No	Not mentioned
Selsdon Group	1973	No	Conservative
Smith Institute	1997	Partly	Independent
Social Affairs Unit[a]	1981	No	Non-partisan
Social Liberal Forum	2009	No	Centre-left
Social Market Foundation	1989	Partly	Non-partisan
Society of Conservative Lawyers	1947	No	Conservative

Name	Year established (disbanded or merged)	Specific education emphasis	Ideology
Statewatch	1991	No	Independent
Stockholm Network	1997	No	Independent
Sutton Trust	1997	Yes	Independent
Tax Payers' Alliance	2004	No	Independent
The Education Foundation	2011	Yes	Non-partisan
The Henry Jackson Society	2005	No	Not mentioned
The Intergenerational Foundation	2011	No	Not mentioned
The Intergenerational Foundation[a]	2011	No	Non-partisan
The Work Foundation	2002	No	Not mentioned
Theos	2006	No	Independent
UK in a Changing Europe	2016	No	Independent
United Nations Association—UK	1945	No	Independent
Unlock Democracy	1999	No	Non-aligned
Wales Centre for Public Policy	2017	No	Not mentioned
WebRoots Democracy	2014	No	Not mentioned
Welsh Centre for International Affairs	1973	No	Not mentioned
Wilberforce Society	2009	Partly	Non-partisan
WISERD	2014	No	Not mentioned
World Conservation Monitoring Centre[b]	2000	No	United Nations Environmental Programme
Young Fabians	1960	Partly	Labour affiliated
Young Foundation	1954	No	Not mentioned
Z/Yen	1994	No	Not mentioned

[a] Start date estimated (first publication or activity).

[b] Foundation year unconfirmed.