

Summary of the presentation by Dr Michael Fullilove

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Think tanks are an essential part of a country's intellectual infrastructure. Their purpose is to act as a conduit between knowledge and power: to thicken the public debate about important policy issues, and to improve the quality of the government's decisions on those issues. Investing in think tanks has some risk attached to it, however, because ideas can be dangerous.

I have worked in two think tank markets: Australia and the United States. In Australia, I wrote the feasibility study for the Lowy Institute, now Australia's leading international policy think tank, in 2002. Before Lowy, the think tank scene in Australia was generally unimpressive. A range of organisations existed, but none had the necessary depth and reach. Most were poorly resourced and they tended to be structured around ideology rather than policy. In particular, there was no broadly-based Australian foreign policy think tank. The Lowy Institute was established in 2003 and has quickly come to dominate the Australian scene. We have also transformed the scene: a number of new entrants have followed our lead, making Australia's think tank environment more crowded and lively. The Lowy Institute has also taken some early steps on the global stage.

At the other end of the spectrum, I have just returned from a year in Washington, DC as a Visiting Fellow in Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution, perhaps the world's finest think tank. The energy, talent, ambition and money in the US think tank world is remarkable to witness. The career paths that exist between the country's think tanks and its government are also fascinating to observe. There are disadvantages to this symbiotic relationship, but the advantages greatly outweigh them.

I believe that Hong Kong can learn lessons on public policy research from both the Australian and US examples.