



## Academic Sociology and Social Policy Think Tanks in Britain and Australia: A Personal Reflection

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**1.1** After 24 years teaching sociology at the University of Sussex, I made a double career-switch in 1999, moving from Britain to Australia, and from university employment to working for public policy think-tanks. Reflecting on my experiences of British and Australian sociology, as well as the academic and applied policy worlds, what stands out most is the ideological conformity and closure of academic sociology in both countries.

**1.2** Part of the problem is the lack of respect and understanding for empirical evidence. Unlike the USA (where I taught in 1996), most academic sociologists in the UK and Australia have no expertise in quantitative methods or statistics. They justify their ignorance through fatuous appeals to anti-positivist philosophy, which in practice means their claims are rarely testable and are not even expected to be so. This has enabled left-wing and feminist ideas to maintain a stranglehold on the discipline, and few sociologists in either country see this as a problem. Despite the image it has of itself as 'open', 'tolerant' and 'critical', academic sociology in Britain and Australia is, in my experience, none of these things.

**1.3** Like most young people drawn to a career in sociology, I started out on the left. My politics were reflected in my early research and, I suspect, in my teaching. Writing on class, housing and the state at a time when Althusserian Marxism was driving the urban sociology agenda, I made a reputation for myself as a 'left Weberian,' challenging Marxist orthodoxies, but from a safely-socialist standpoint. My career blossomed. Articles were published, publications got cited, invitations were received to prestigious foreign conferences, research grant applications were favourably reviewed, and promotions followed.

**1.4** But during the 1980s, my politics changed. After falling out with the Labour Party over its refusal to allow working class people to buy their council houses, I started to wonder why they should not also be free to choose the schooling and health services they wanted. Before I knew it, I was attending lunches at the Institute of Economic Affairs and reading Friedrich Hayek. This was not a good career move in a discipline where the gatekeepers were (and still are) overwhelmingly socialist (90% of sociology professors in Britain describe their politics as moderate or far left: Halsey 2004). While friends and colleagues at Sussex remained friendly and collegial, the sociological establishment outside the university became increasingly antagonistic. Our growing estrangement can be traced in my CV.

**1.5** In the mid-1980s, I was on four journal editorial boards. By the early 1990s, I was on none. For a period in the mid-eighties, I was serving as external examiner at three different universities simultaneously. A few years later, all the invitations had dried up. It was the same story with PhD examining, and with peer-reviewed research grants. The quarter of a million pounds of ESRC funding I received in the 1980s had dwindled by the 1990s to a single, £8,000 personal grant (a sum small enough not to require approval by peer review).

**1.6** I used this grant to support some research into social mobility, from which I concluded that Britain is more meritocratic than most sociologists believe (summarised in Saunders 2010a). My report was praised by ESRC officials as 'a major study,' and they featured it on the front page of their newsletter (ESRC, 1996). Emboldened by this, I applied for more funding to develop the work, but this meant negotiating the peer review process. Predictably, I was blocked, twice, by hostile academic assessors. On the day I received the second rejection, I met somebody who had just been given thousands of pounds by ESRC to study social behaviour in graveyards.

**1.7** It was clear that I could no longer get research funding, and I was struggling to get published. I finally realised it was time to get out when a first-year undergraduate told me her VI Form College careers adviser had warned her against applying to Sussex because she might get taught by the right-wing professor there.

**1.8** In Australia, I was initially employed as research manager at the government-funded Institute of Family

Studies. In some respects I felt I had leapt from frying pan to fire. As an academic, I at least had the freedom to write what I wanted, even if I couldn't get research funding, but as a public servant, government ministers and bureaucrats routinely censored and vetoed my work. On the other hand, for the first time in my career, I was enjoying some influence over policy, for politicians, bureaucrats and journalists paid attention to what I was writing. It was ironic. As an academic I had spent years producing work that almost nobody read. As a think-tank researcher, I spent just weeks knocking out reports that would be presented at high-level meetings in Canberra and earnestly discussed in the press and in radio interviews. It was exhilarating to find an audience, and because Australia is a smaller country, it was that much easier to get access to the people who mattered.

**1.9** Outside of the government and the Institute, I swiftly discovered that Australian academic sociologists were just like those I had left behind. I never encountered any 'right-wing' sociologists working in Australian universities (there are only a handful in Britain, of course, but the size of the university population here means one or two sneak through). This meant the dominant, left-feminist orthodoxy was never challenged in Australian academia, and when I turned up and started to challenge it, the reaction was fierce.

**1.10** At one prestigious family policy conference, I was on a panel discussing child wellbeing. Outlining evidence that children tend to do better raised by their two natural parents than by one, I was stopped by a rising volume of hissing from the hall. I learned later that this was being orchestrated by one of my fellow panellists, a prominent feminist intellectual who had delivered Australia's equivalent of the Reith lectures just a year or two earlier. She was sitting behind me making gestures as I stood at the lectern.

**1.11** Shortly after that, I moved to the Centre for Independent Studies, Australia's leading pro-market think-tank. From then on, I had less to do with academics, although there was a recurring problem of my sharing the same name as the left-wing professor of Social Policy at the University of New South Wales. To resolve the confusion, academics began referring to us as 'the good' and 'the bad' Peter Saunders. No prizes for guessing which was which.

**1.12** I have been writing for 'right-wing' think-tanks ever since, both in Australia and in Britain (where I now publish on an *ad hoc* basis with Policy Exchange and Civitas). When I encounter academic sociologists nowadays, they tend to react in one of two ways to my work.

**1.13** Some get irritated at having to deal with somebody they think lacks their gravitas and credentials. The most recent example was Professor Richard Wilkinson's (2000) refusal to debate his *Spirit Level* statistics with me, on the grounds that my critique of his work (Saunders 2010b) did not appear in a peer-reviewed academic journal (see Jump, 2010; Hawkes, 2010). For all their professed egalitarianism, social scientists are inclined to think you are not worthy of their attention if you are not based in a university department.

**1.14** Others dismiss my work as ideologically contaminated on the grounds that I am funded by private sector money. They assume that small, independent think tanks which have to raise all their own funds must be compromised, but that people like themselves, who depend for their entire lives on tax revenues raised and distributed by the state, have no ideological axe to grind. This not only reveals an extraordinary lack of critical, reflexive, sociological imagination. It also demonstrates a depressing ignorance of how think-tanks work.

**1.15** As an academic in Britain, I was censored by the process of peer review. As a government researcher in Australia, I was censored by bureaucrats and politicians. But writing for think-tanks in both countries, I am not censored at all. I write what I want, and if they sympathise with what I am saying, they publish it. If one think-tank doesn't like it, another will take it, for I now operate within a genuine free market in ideas.

**1.16** In my experience, the pressure to intellectual conformity is much higher in academic sociology than in policy think tanks. It's just that most academics do not realise it, for they spend their lives swimming with the ideological currents rather than making any effort to go against them.

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