The West Australian Policy Forum: our progressive State think-tank

Democracies divide into those with a strongly unitary tendency, like France or Japan, and those like Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and ourselves with a long tradition of devolved administration – in Australia’s case, peaceful and long-established, in the United Kingdom’s case, bitter and antagonistic for centuries. Federal systems are unusual beasts. We too easily forget that less than a century ago, the survival of Australia as a nation was placed in doubt with a referendum actually passed in WA for independence. Australia’s successful federal system has made such a referendum much less likely today: in a country with such diverse geographic and economic constraints and opportunities, it is probably the only way to keep the country together.

Maintaining a federal system, though, requires initiatives at State as well as federal level. WA’s geography, its resource-driven economy, and its society has unique problems which require resolution at a State level. From a progressive perspective, there is much that can and should be done at a State level whichever Government is in power in Perth or Canberra.

One way to get action initiated is through a think tank paper in the first instance. Think tanks continue to play an important role in the development of Government policy in Australia. Writing for a think tank enables individuals to express their own personal views, transcending the boundaries of Party and faction or the equally constraining process of peer group review for an academic publication. However, until this year all Australian think tanks have been federal in conception and based in the Eastern states in practice. On the right, policies for WA to adopt have been developed and promoted on the other side of the continent.

In sharp contrast, the West Australian Policy Forum (WAPF), www.wapolicyforum.org.au exists to identify problems and promote suitable progressive solutions that State Parliaments and other State actors can adopt. Since its launch in May 2008, WAPF has received media coverage for a range of free-to-download papers published on urgent issues for the State, ranging across aviation, health and environmental policy through to an annual Shadow State Budget. Papers typically extend to 5-10,000 words, essays 2-5000 words, and both contain specific policy advice for Government and other policy actors. Most recently for example Professor Gavin Mooney has advocated that as part of a civic-driven State health policy, junk food producers should be taxed to pay for the consequences of their production. In 2009 in addition to a new range of papers WAPF will also start running public seminars on matters of State interest.

WAPF welcomes authors of any progressive orientation, whether in academia, private practice or in the public sector. Ideas for papers and essays should be sent in the first instance to contact@wapolicyforum.org.au. The only constraints are that authors must follow a broadly progressive, non-discriminatory approach and focus on what can and should be done at a State level here in WA.