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# So, you want to run a think tank? Lessons from the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government

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## About this case study

Over the last few decades, scholars have discovered novel approaches to the study of think tanks, and in the process, have unearthed important questions about these diverse and eclectic organisations. While efforts are underway to more accurately define and classify these institutions, attention is also being devoted to the various ties think tanks have established with key stakeholders, including donors, the media, NGOs, international and regional organisations, policymakers and the public. What is often overlooked, however, are the often-strained relationships that have surfaced between think tanks and the universities where they are or were housed.

In some ways, it is not surprising that little scholarly attention has been paid to think tanks located on university campuses. After all, since both kinds of institutions are committed ostensibly to the advancement of knowledge, what is the likelihood that shining the spotlight on them would reveal anything noteworthy? Studying how several private and independent think tanks, like Rand and the Brookings Institution, navigate their way through a crowded marketplace of ideas may be more riveting for some scholars intrigued with how think tanks exercise policy influence. But exploring the often tenuous and conflict-ridden interactions between university-based think tanks and their hosts can reveal even more important lessons about how institutions entrusted with generating and disseminating ideas can often find themselves at odds.

Drawing on the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, the only public policy institute in Canada established by a former prime minister, I argue that although think tanks and the universities they call home are in the business of ideas, it does not necessarily mean that a natural synergy will emerge between them. Indeed, what is more likely to happen is that when competing and conflicting agendas and priorities come to light, fractures in their relationship will become even more pronounced. When this occurs, as has been witnessed in the United States, the ties between some think tanks and universities could be permanently severed. In other instances, the relationship, though rocky, might simply hobble along. This study explores several of the most common causes of conflict that can and often do drive a wedge between think tanks and universities. In the process, it will highlight why both institutions might need to rethink how best to harness and promote the intellectual resources on their campuses.

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# 1. Introduction: the perfect storm

In January 2019, I left Western University in London, Ontario, my academic home for 25 years, to assume the role of inaugural director of the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government (MI). In addition, I would hold the Steven K. Hudson Chair in Canada-US Relations and the role of Professor of Political Science at St. Francis Xavier University (StFX). StFX is a small predominantly Catholic university located in Antigonish, Nova Scotia (Cameron, 1996).

After studying think tanks in the United States, Canada, and parts of Europe for over three decades, I could not resist the opportunity to lead a think tank and to implement some of the ideas I had about positioning these organizations more strategically on the public policy landscape. I was aware that some American and Canadian think tanks affiliated with universities had experienced tumultuous relationships with their hosts. However, it wasn't until I observed first-hand the tensions that arose between the Mulroney Institute of Government, the Right Honourable Brian Mulroney, and the administration at St. Francis Xavier University, that I began to appreciate how problematic the ties between think tanks, universities, and donors could become.

What awaited me at this rural university in northeastern Nova Scotia was a perfect storm: a former prime minister consumed with promoting and safeguarding his legacy and who had no patience or tolerance for faculty; a university administration that had little knowledge of, and even less interest in, hosting a public policy research institute on campus; and an Institute (housed in a $70 million dollar building) with no operating budget. Decades of reading, writing, and lecturing about think tanks globally had shaped my thinking around how to build a successful think tank, but nothing in my career had prepared me for what would unfold over the next five years.

In retrospect, I should have paid more attention to the waving red flags that had revealed themselves during my interview for the directorship of the Mulroney Institute, as well as in my early meetings and phone calls with the late Brian Mulroney and the StFX senior leadership. For instance, despite repeated attempts to find out the annual operating budget for the Mulroney Institute, my inquiries were met with silence. No one mentioned that the Institute would have to rely on federal funding granting agencies to support various research initiatives. There was never any indication that the university or Mr. Mulroney had reached out to consultants and academics knowledgeable about the think tank community before they began to think about this enormous undertaking. Moreover, any questions I had about strategic planning around the Institute elicited a similar reaction. All I was told was that as inaugural director, I would be presented with a blank canvas. Little did I know that the reason the canvas was blank was because in the dozens of meetings Mulroney and successive presidents of the university had about building Mulroney Hall, no one had considered setting aside a budget to run the Mulroney Institute. One of the few times a senior administrator actually responded to me was when I asked what role the prime minister would play in the day-to-day operations of the Institute. I was simply told, "whatever you do, do not offend Mr. Mulroney."

Initially, I chalked up the cool reception I received during the first months of my appointment at StFX to three factors: I was an outsider, a native of Ontario with no roots in Nova Scotia; As an undergraduate, I never attended StFX or any other Maritime-based university; and I was perceived by many on campus as a Mulroney lackey with ideological leanings not in step with the majority of the faculty. While I plead guilty to the first two counts, the third could not be further from the truth. Throughout my career, I have avoided becoming involved in partisan politics, and although my focus on conservative think tanks might suggest to some that I am a fellow traveller, they would be gravely mistaken. Regardless, of these reasons, or how out of place I was made to feel, I never imagined being immersed in an environment where so many people went out of their way to sabotage the success of an organization that not only bore the name of a former prime minister, but the crest of a well-known university.

The purpose of this paper is not to rehash old wounds, nor is it to portray myself as a victim. I willingly assumed the inaugural directorship of the Mulroney Institute and remain very proud of what my colleagues and I were able to achieve. Rather, the purpose here is to offer a cautionary tale for those contemplating building a public policy institute on a university campus. It is a story about what can, and often does, happen when two organisations, ostensibly committed to the shared pursuit of knowledge and who have close ties to a common donor, find themselves at odds over competing objectives and priorities. There is no doubt that I underestimated the damage that could be done by the steps the university undertook to limit the MI's autonomy, and how a conflict-ridden relationship between the Mulroney Institute and StFX could paralyze the latter. Based on this experience, it has occurred to me that universities might not provide the most appropriate and welcoming environment for think tanks to flourish. Still, I remain convinced, notwithstanding the many underlying causes of tension that plagued this affiliation, that there remains a path forward.

In this study, I explore the main causes of tension between university-based or affiliated public policy research institutes and their hosts. Drawing on the accounts of several US think tanks, where years of dissent with university administrators, faculty, and students have taken their toll, I argue that the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government is destined, unless its relationship with StFX changes dramatically, to suffer the same fate as some of its American counterparts.

The story of the MI is that of a non-partisan research centre that at its inception held great promise but became the victim of too many broken promises. It provides valuable lessons to those trying to explain why think tanks and universities might be incompatible unless proper safeguards are in place. In the following pages, it will become apparent that in addition to chronic budgetary problems, three factors posed significant challenges to the MI's operations: the absence of proper channels of communication between Mr. Mulroney and the Institute and university leadership; conflicting and competing goals and priorities between Mulroney, the MI and StFX; and a widespread culture of complacency at the university that eroded any sustained interest faculty and administrators might have had in the work of the MI.

The first factor relates to the inability of the senior leadership at StFX to establish proper channels of communication between the university and its most important donor, Brian Mulroney. Unwilling to offend Mulroney, the university enabled the former prime minister to conduct himself as if he were in charge of the Institute, rather than as someone who could be called upon to offer assistance and advice. On a regular basis, he issued directives to me about what he wanted done, despite having no official role at the university. In the absence of any defined parameters, Mulroney regarded the Institute as "his Institute,"over which he had free reign. For universities, as with many other institutions in the not-for-profit sector, managing donor relations can be problematic at the best of times, but they can become particularly difficult and sensitive when a former prime minister with access to a large and powerful network of contacts can leverage these relationships to exercise influence. It did not take long to figure out why I should never offend Mr. Mulroney. The message was crystal clear: non-compliance comes with a price.

Second, from the time of its inception, StFX remained either indifferent to the MI or took steps to undermine it. Indeed, rather than promoting the MI as an institutional priority worthy of sustained funding, the StFX Advancement Office which is responsible for fundraising and supporting the president's initiatives, allowed it to flounder. In short, the MI and StFX had competing priorities. For StFX, the primary goal was attracting enough funds for a building that would have sufficient classroom space to accommodate most of the courses offered at the university; for Mulroney, as will be discussed, this project was first and foremost about his legacy. Not surprisingly, these competing priorities and agendas helped set the stage for conflict between StFX and its most prominent alumnus.

A third factor, which I call a culture of complacency, permeated StFX, preventing its centres and institutes from achieving their desired goals. In many ways, StFX was simply not prepared to absorb a public policy research institute tasked with a mandate to shape the national conversation around key domestic and foreign policy issues. The university's primary focus on undergraduate teaching, combined with a narrow view of what skills students needed to enter the work force, limited its capacity to appreciate what impact and notoriety a well-resourced think tank could bring. Indeed, none of the factors I have identified would surprise the administration at the university. Successive presidents, and the people who advised them, many of whom graduated from StFX, saw their role as preserving the status quo even at the expense of the university's reputation. With no previous ties to StFX, I was more inclined to speak out, but my concerns fell upon deaf ears. After expressing my frustration with the environment at StFX, and how it was choking the life out of the MI, I sent a detailed letter to university president Andy Hakin in 2022, followed by a one-hour phone call. In response to my litany of concerns, Hakin stated, "what do you expect, the whole place is broken."

The factors outlined above will be explored in greater detail, and examined in the broader context of think tanks, the primary role they play, and the position they occupy on the political landscape in Canada, the US, and around the globe. Particular attention will focus on university-based think tanks and why they often find themselves facing antagonism by faculty members and university administrations.

In the first section of the paper I look at the founding of the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government, which I refer to as a "vanity think tank", an expression I coined in earlier writings (Abelson, 2018). This is followed by an examination of the various factors that have limited its autonomy at StFX.

Next, I'll delve into the factors constraining the MI's independence at StFX. Then, I'll explore the challenges university-based or affiliated think tanks encounter in more detail. Lastly, I'll share the important lessons I've learned at the Mulroney Institute and suggest steps future think tank leaders could take to safeguard themselves and their organizations as they navigate the competitive marketplace of ideas.

## 2. Breaking ground, building a legacy

Few people were more aware and sensitive to the challenges of building a world-class think tank at StFX than Brian Mulroney. He had firsthand experience with fundraising for the university and recognized that, despite its strengths, StFX often lacked the drive and desire to become more than a teaching institution in a pastoral Nova Scotia setting. He imparted this insight to me when I was appointed as Director of the Mulroney Institute in the summer of 2018. During one of our first conversations, Mulroney said, "When you get to StFX, you are going to have to kick a lot of asses. Otherwise, nothing will ever get done" (Abelson, June 2018). Mulroney's cautionary words about the culture of StFX could not have been more accurate. This did not prevent him from investing six years of his life in transforming his vision for Mulroney Hall and the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government into reality (Canadian Press, 2016).

A brief account of how the MI was established is provided on its website that states in part:

> *"When former St. Francis Xavier University president Dr Sean Riley and Tim Lang, his vice president, boarded a plane bound for Palm Beach, Florida, in March 2012, they had a singular goal: to convince Brian Mulroney to spearhead what would become the largest fundraising campaign in the history of StFX. Mr. Mulroney did not require much convincing. The 18th prime minister of Canada, and member of StFX' s graduating class of 1959, had remained a staunch and loyal supporter of his alma mater from the time he began his undergraduate studies in the fall of 1955. Heeding his father's advice that "the only way out of a pulp and paper town is through a university door," Mr. Mulroney never forgot what StFX had done for him. It was at this small liberal arts university nestled in the heart of Antigonish, Nova Scotia, where Mr. Mulroney found his voice, and it was where he acquired a skill set that would serve him well in the private sector as a distinguished lawyer and executive, and as a world statesman" (www.mulroneyinstitute.ca).*

The expectation that Mulroney could deliver was well founded. This was not the first time he was asked to lead a fundraising campaign for StFX. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Mulroney agreed to raise money to construct an aquatic centre on campus. The target for the campaign was $6-7 million; Mulroney collected twice that much. But what Sean Riley had in mind for Mulroney Hall was far more ambitious. A minimum of $25 million was needed for the construction of the building housing the MI, or so Riley thought. In the end, the cost was closer to $70 million. Mulroney's fundraising skills, however, more than compensated for this increase. The issue of whose name would adorn the new building was never really in question. While Mulroney insists that he was reluctant to have his

name appear on bricks and mortar, Riley understood that despite being out of power for decades, the Mulroney name still carried enormous weight in political and financial circles, connections that could and would translate into large donations.

The more pressing issue among successive StFX administrations was what would happen inside Mulroney Hall. Of course, over a dozen classrooms for lectures and seminars would be required, as would a 300-seat auditorium. These were basic needs for the university, but what would make the complex special? For Mulroney, the answer was clear: the space should inspire students to think about a career in public service, and what better way to motivate them than to showcase his life as prime minister and world leader.

There are dozens of public schools and government buildings named after Canadian prime ministers. Mulroney Hall is, however, in many ways, unique. As much museum as teaching space, Mulroney Hall has been described disparagingly by a senior administrator at StFX as nothing short of a "shrine" to Brian Mulroney (Abelson, June 2023). Beginning with photos and mementos of his student days at StFX, his life story unfolds over four floors of the complex starting in the Joyce Family Atrium on the lower level. From there, his time as Canada's 18th prime minister and global statesman are showcased over three more floors. They include interactive pods that play videos featuring Mulroney giving speeches around the globe and a replica of the prime minister's office on the second level. The selection of artifacts for the displays housed in Mulroney Hall and the descriptions that accompany them raise interesting and important questions for public historians about how political leaders are remembered and how they shape their own legacy. Visitors to the complex are inculcated with a narrative designed for, and approved by, Brian Mulroney himself.

Mulroney Hall was also intended to be a venue where in-depth research on important public policy issues would be undertaken. Located on a university campus, it only made sense that an institute or centre be established that would draw on the expertise of academics and policy practitioners who could share their knowledge and insights with students, the media, the public, and other key stakeholders. Moreover, such a research centre or institute could complement the teaching in the public policy and governance programme. In principle, Mulroney was on board with the idea of creating the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government which could, if properly funded, go a long way in promoting his legacy. Among other things, he raised approximately $10 million to support research chairs in "Canada-US Relations" and in "Women, Policy, and Governance Leadership." There were plans to create close to a half-dozen research chairs, but sufficient monies were never secured.

In many ways, the blueprint that Mulroney and StFX had in mind for the MI made perfect sense. As is the case with many university-affiliated think tanks in Canada and the United States, the MI would rely on three pillars to promote its work: teaching, research, and public outreach and engagement, activities that will be explored in more detail later.

## 3. A time for celebration? The Mulroney Institute opens its doors

There was cause for celebration at St. Francis Xavier University on 18 September 2019 (Stone, 2019). Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and his wife Mila strolled into the Joyce Family Atrium in Mulroney Hall to welcome more than 300 guests, invited to the campus to mark the official opening of the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government. This special moment for Canada's 18th prime minister and his family was witnessed by Charles Bronfman, David Sobey, Steven Hudson, as well as other financiers, politicians, and dignitaries. It came after six years of Brian Mulroney traveling across the world, at his own cost, to raise the $125 million needed to fund the construction of this cutting-edge research and teaching facility, which spans 100,000 square feet and features interactive pods with touch screen consoles for watching videos, displays, a replica of the prime minister's office, and a TV studio.

In the process of spearheading what became the largest fundraising campaign in the history of StFX, Mulroney had, in some ways, realized his dream of a monument that paid homage to how he transformed Canada during his nine years in office. He coveted a US presidential-style library and museum that would inspire younger generations to pursue careers in government and in the not-for-profit-sector. Indeed, it was his many visits to the Reagan Presidential Library and Museum in Simi Valley, California, and to President George H.W. Bush's complex in College Station, Texas, that reminded him how important it was to commemorate significant commitments to public service. And what better place to build a monument than at his alma mater where he discovered his voice and love of politics. Although other Canadian universities including McGill and Western University tried to convince Mulroney to bring his institute to their campuses, his emotional connection with StFX was too strong to overcome. Despite this, there were several times when Mulroney's frustration with, and lack of confidence in, the senior leadership at StFX compelled him to reconsider his decision.

StFX president Sean Riley and his successor Kent MacDonald were thrilled that Brian Mulroney had agreed to launch a major fundraising campaign for the university. He began by committing a $1 million gift of his own. They understood the value of the powerful narrative that could be woven around Mulroney's time as an undergraduate and his rise to political power: the story of a young boy from a small Quebec town arriving on campus in the Fall of 1955 with little more than the one blazer he owned neatly folded in a cardboard suitcase. Who then managed, through sheer tenacity and perseverance, to overcome his modest roots to become one of Canada's most celebrated prime ministers (Sawatsky, 1991; MacDonald, 1984). The StFX leadership could not have inherited a better script and they wasted little time in enlisting the university's most famous alumnus to raise millions of dollars to replace Nicholson Hall, a dilapidated structure occupying the most valuable piece of real estate on campus.

In some ways, Mulroney and StFX found a way to satisfy both of their agendas while furthering the needs of the university. Mulroney would have an imposing building that acknowledged, in not-so-subtle ways, his place in Canadian and world history, and StFX would have a beautiful space they could showcase when recruiting students. In theory, this arrangement should have worked, but, as is often the case with the best laid plans, there was a problem: Mulroney Hall was not built simply to display dozens of artifacts presented to Mulroney during his tenure as prime minister; it was also intended to be home to the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government, a public policy research centre or think tank devoted to recommending practical solutions for some of the most complex policy problems facing Canada.

The Mulroney Institute was also established to provide financial and institutional support to a new four-year interdisciplinary programme in Public Policy and Governance (PGOV). As part of his fundraising campaign, Mulroney secured millions of dollars for this programme, housed in the Faculty of Arts. He promoted it as a school of public affairs where students could learn real-world politics from Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, and other world leaders with whom he rubbed shoulders. While Mulroney was successful in finding funds to endow several lucrative student scholarships, bursaries, and research chairs, no world leaders other than himself and Justin Trudeau, who spoke at the Inaugural Atlantic Economic Forum hosted by the Mulroney Institute in June 2023 (McMillan, 2023), made their way virtually or in person to StFX.

Even more significant, as noted, was that no funds were set aside by Mulroney or by the university to operate the Institute, a glaring oversight that has come to paralyze its operations and brought many of its activities to a standstill. Convinced that Mulroney and his expansive network of wealthy friends would continue providing large gifts to the MI well after the grand opening (Dubinsky, 2017), StFX did not feel inclined or motivated to provide the Institute with a budget line even when Mulroney's fundraising efforts were thwarted during the pandemic.

Despite refusing to invest in the operations of the MI, senior administrators at StFX insisted that the Institute was a university priority, a disingenuous message delivered regularly by successive presidents to placate Mulroney. It's undeniable that both the university leadership and Mulroney bore the ultimate responsibility for all financial decisions related to the construction of Mulroney Hall and the funding needed for the Mulroney Institute of Government. However, additional context is needed to fully understand how they ended up in the predicament they found themselves in.

Mulroney Hall was well under construction in the Winter of 2019 when the plans for establishing the MI were being drafted. It was generally understood that the MI would support a newly launched undergraduate programme in public policy and governance, and that the Institute would have a say in the kinds of courses to be offered. Mulroney had raised close to $20 million for bursaries and scholarships to recruit students to this programme and his goal was clear: provide qualified students with the education and tools they required to pursue leadership roles in government, the non-governmental community, and in the private sector. And what better inspiration would they need, he

believed, than a reminder that one of their own had reached the apex of political power in Canada. An institute that could engage in research and host conferences, workshops, and distinguished speakers was also on Mulroney's radar. He had raised approximately $10 million to support two research chairs, with the intention of finding funds for at least 4 to 6 more. Finally, Mulroney remained emphatic that researchers in the MI had to be engaged regularly with the national media if they were going to bring attention and notoriety to the work of the institute. He insisted that a TV studio be built to facilitate access to media outlets around the world.

In principle, what Mulroney, and the senior leadership at StFX had mapped out for Mulroney Hall and the MI made sense. After all, what could go wrong in supporting an undergraduate programme in a brand-new teaching and research complex, hiring distinguished researchers with expertise in high-profile public policy fields, and supporting a range of initiatives to raise the public profile of an institute that bore the name of a former Prime Minister? As it turns out, just about everything.

It didn't take a team of forensic accountants to figure out that the course Mulroney and StFX had chartered for the MI was rife with problems. Of the approximately $125 million Mulroney had raised for this initiative, more than half went into building Mulroney Hall. An additional $15-18 million was spent refurbishing Nicholson Tower, the building adjacent to Mulroney Hall. In a rash decision that Mulroney regretted, he agreed to allocate money that should have endowed the Mulroney Institute, to beautify Nicholson Tower so that its dilapidated state would not detract from the magnificence of Mulroney Hall. Although his preference was to have the tower torn down and rebuilt, there simply was not enough money. As a result, Mulroney agreed to President Kent MacDonald's request for renovation money and in doing so sealed the fate of the MI. As noted, the remaining funds went into student scholarship and bursaries, and a few research chairs.

Before the Mulroney Institute even moved into its new offices, the damage caused by poor financial decisions had already placed the Institute in a precarious position. Interest earned from endowed research chairs that had yet to be filled was made available to Institute staff to sponsor a handful of events and to launch a print and on-line publication series, but a better solution had to be found. At a bare minimum, a $500,000 budget was required to keep the Institute afloat each year, a far cry from the funds available to several of the top think tanks in Canada, and not even close to the resources enjoyed by the most prominent American think tanks, a goal to which Mulroney believed the Institute should aspire.

For Mulroney, the answer was clear. Admitting that he had made a mistake in not establishing an operating budget (Abelson, 2019), Mulroney was convinced that the creation of an External Advisory Board populated mostly by millionaires and billionaires would save the day (Brian Mulroney Institute of Government *Annual Report 2022*). It took over a year for Mark Mulroney, Mulroney's second son and Vice-Chairman of Scotiabank, to establish and convene the first virtual meeting of the Board. This meeting lasted barely an hour and the second board meeting, held a year later,

lasted half that time, a stark reminder of how much a priority members assigned to their role. In addition to sharing their advice, board members, with few exceptions, would be expected to contribute $100,000 per year to operate the Institute. Had all the Board members fulfilled their obligations, an annual operating budget of over $600,000 would have been available. A single luncheon hosted by Brian Mulroney in Toronto in 2021 brought in close to $500,000 for the MI, but no additional funds, and certainly no member contributions, were secured. For the university, there was no plan B. If Mulroney and the External Advisory Board could not provide ample funding to support the work of the Institute, there was no place to go and no one to turn to. Although it is not uncommon for universities to provide little more than seed money to help research centres and institutes get off the ground, as StFX was prepared to do, it is surprising, given how much the university could potentially benefit from having a high-profile institute on its campus, that university administrators did not have a contingency plan. Rather, they were prepared to gamble the viability of the MI on an aging prime minister in declining health, leaving him with the awesome responsibility of having to secure several million dollars more to endow the organization. Even when it became apparent to the senior leadership at StFX that the External Advisory Board was a complete failure, no steps were taken to bail the Institute out.

Tasked with the mandate of building a high-profile public policy institute with no funds on the horizon, and no commitment from the university to contribute financially, the MI found itself without a life raft. While the Institute relied on the funds it had at its disposal to build its research and public profile, it was only a matter of time before reality set in. What started off with a bang could conceivably end with a whimper.

In the summer of 2023, the Mulroney Institute co-hosted the inaugural Atlantic Economic Forum at StFX and managed, with $200,000 support from the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agencies (ACOA) and several corporate sponsors, to organize a well-attended and successful event. While plans are underway to host similar conferences, no progress has been made in addressing MI's financial mess.

# 4. One step forward, four steps back: the wayward journey of the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government

The failure to establish a sustainable operating budget was only one of several problems plaguing the MI. Placing a public policy institute on a campus without a strong research culture met resistance from both senior leadership and from many faculty who had little enthusiasm for supporting an Institute that could take priority over other university projects. Rather than being acknowledged as a research institute that could enhance the quality of undergraduate education on campus and bring notoriety to a small Maritime-based university, the MI, from the start, was greeted with suspicion, indifference, and, at times, outright hostility. Furthermore, numerous faculty members felt uneasy passing by or through a building daily that was named after a former Progressive Conservative prime minister, posing a challenge for an Institute aiming to establish a robust public presence. Mulroney frequently commented during his visits to StFX, "I am not sure why I spent so much money building and renovating faculty offices. Not one of them (faculty) would have voted for me" (Abelson, 2020).

As a result of tensions that emerged over funding and a host of other issues, it did not take long for Mulroney and StFX to find themselves at odds. Not used to having his concerns ignored or overshadowed by competing interests, Mulroney conveyed palpable displeasure with StFX in the months and years following the Institute's founding (Abelson, 2020).

Notwithstanding periodic visits to campus to reinforce his message about the importance of the MI to the university, Mulroney gained little traction, which no doubt contributed to his growing frustration. At the same time, the StFX leadership was becoming increasingly disillusioned with Mulroney who didn't seem to appreciate how universities worked and, frankly, often didn't care. What became painfully clear, however, was that the university administration did not welcome, and was losing patience with, Mulroney's assertive and at times acerbic tone.

## Cultivating donors: a blessing and a curse

Despite the initial support and encouragement for the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government, as evidenced in the university's promotional materials, senior officials at StFX were reluctant to assign a higher priority to the MI than to other institutes and centres on campus. These included the Coady International Institute, named for Reverend Moses Coady, and the Frank McKenna Centre for Leadership, established and financed by the former premier of New Brunswick. Put simply, university leaders did not want to be criticized for prioritizing some institutes and centres over others, fearing pushback from faculty, alumni, and donors. That the Mulroney Institute did not receive top billing from StFX was not only an annoyance to Brian Mulroney; it frustrated, irritated, and angered him.

As much as Mulroney was disappointed and disillusioned over the lack of attention StFX devoted to the MI, he was unable to convince the university administration to recalibrate. To successive StFX presidents, Mulroney was both a blessing and a curse. He could bring prestige to the university and access to potential donors, but his insistence on being actively involved in the work of the Institute never sat well with StFX. To quote Mulroney, "They just wanted me to find the money and leave them alone. That was never going to happen" (Abelson, 2022).

Concerned that refusing to capitulate to a former prime minister could have dire consequences for a financially strapped university, StFX sought to mollify Mulroney without changing course. This strategy might have bought the university some time, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic when Mulroney was unable to express his concerns in person, but it only served to exacerbate an already precarious situation. It was in this environment, one rife with conflict and tension, that the MI struggled to chart its destiny.

## Competing priorities

As Director of the MI, I soon figured out Mulroney's priorities. He wanted "his" institute to have a national and preferably international profile; a building which attracted visitors from all over the world so they could admire his achievements and what he had done for the university; a video library page on the Institute's web site populated entirely by interviews he had granted and speeches he had delivered to the US Congress, and to other esteemed bodies; and the presence of former policymakers on campus who could teach students what decision-making at the highest levels of government entailed. Rarely could Mulroney resist the temptation of offending academics and the work they produced. To the former prime minister, academics "didn't know a goddam thing," a sentiment he expressed while introducing Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at the inaugural Atlantic Economic Forum held in June 2023. This is consistent with a comment he made during one of the few External Advisory Board meetings in 2022 when he stated that "the books the MI produced through McGill-Queen's University Press weren't exactly best sellers like [Jacqueline Suzanne's] *Valley of the Dolls*."

Although I became immune to the insults hurled at me and my academic colleagues, it didn't change two fundamental problems. First, what Mulroney wanted cost hundreds of thousands of dollars which he and the External Advisory Board were unable to secure, and two, the university leadership was growing tired of being verbally assaulted by Mulroney who wasn't bringing in the kind of money he had promised. Put simply, in a short period of time, Mulroney went from being the goose that laid the golden egg to an albatross around the StFX leadership's neck. It is not surprising that as the money began to dry up, Mulroney's influence began to wane. With other priorities for StFX to worry about, including how to pay down millions of dollars of debt on two student residences built during StFX President Sean Riley's tenure, Mulroney was becoming less and less relevant.

## A culture of complacency

But there was another factor at play that was undermining the MI's ability to grow - a culture of complacency that in many ways eroded what the MI was trying to achieve. Known primarily as an undergraduate university, StFX is rarely perceived in the university community as a cutting-edge research institution, despite having several talented researchers on campus. With modest tenure and promotion standards, and comparatively low salaries, the incentive for faculty to produce high-quality work is low, unless, of course, they are trying to find another academic position. In other words, there is little motivation for faculty to devote countless hours to building their scholarly profile or for taking the time to help centres and institutes reach their goals. Despite establishing a Fellows programme at the MI to encourage faculty from across campus to contribute ideas and research papers, only a handful took their responsibilities seriously. This culture permeates much of StFX which may explain why the universitỳ s rankings in the annual Macleaǹ s survey of Canadian Universities have dropped consistently over the last several years.

Taken together, growing tensions between Mulroney and the StFX leadership, their conflicting and often competing priorities, and a culture of complacency that in many ways proved toxic, it is understandable why the MI could never get on track. Even more disheartening and distressing is that none of the key problems and barriers identified are easy to resolve. Furthermore, the academic culture and traditions at StFX are so deeply entrenched that any efforts to reform the institution are likely to be met with resistance and scorn. If this is indeed the case, what chance does a research institute that was launched with such fanfare have to survive? The experience of the MI is not atypical, particularly for university-affiliated think tanks. It is less common, however, for think tanks that are institutionally autonomous to undergo this kind of turmoil, a subject which is discussed below.

# 5. Think tanks, public policy, and the marketplace of ideas

According to the 2020 Global Go-To Think Tank Index Report (McGann, 2021), over 11,000 think tanks exist worldwide. Close to half (47%) of these institutions can be found in Europe and North America. Home to over 2,000 think tanks or public policy research institutes, the United States is often considered the epicentre of the think tank world. The US boasts several prominent research centres including the Rand Corporation (Abella, 2008; Kaplan, 1985; Smith, 1966), the Heritage Foundation (Edwards, 1997; 2003), the Brookings Institution (Critchlow, 1985; Smith, 1991), and the Council on Foreign Relations (Schulzinger, 1984). Think tanks vary enormously in size, resources, areas of specialization, and ideological leanings. They also differ greatly in the priority they assign to carrying out specific functions such as research, advocacy, and public outreach (Abelson, 2018).

As a field of scholarly inquiry, the study of think tanks has intensified over the past few decades as academics from various disciplines have sought to explain the growth of these diverse and eclectic institutions and their desire to engage various stakeholders to shape public opinion and public policy (Medvetz, 2012; Abelson, 2018; Abelson, Brooks, and Xua, 2017).

Although scholars have yet to reach a consensus on what constitutes a think tank, they agree that these types of organizations share many common attributes - most importantly, a desire to influence the way policymakers, the media, donors, and members of the attentive public think about and act upon a host of domestic and foreign policy issues (Abelson and Rastrick, 2021). As policy influencers, think tanks seek to achieve their goal by generating and disseminating policy research, hosting conferences, seminars, and workshops, sharing their expertise and insights with the print, broadcast, and electronic media, and testifying before legislative committees.

There is no doubt that some countries and political systems provide more fertile soil for think tanks to grow and proliferate in than others, and no other country has given rise to more high profile think tanks than the United States (Abelson and Rastrick, 2021). The reasons for this have been examined in detail (Abelson, 2018). So too has the important role think tanks play in bridging the gap between the academic and policy-making worlds, a privileged space on the public policy landscape that affords them multiple opportunities to shape the discourse around key policy issues.

The history of think tanks in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, the European Union, Germany, China, and many other countries has led in recent years to an impressive number of books and scholarly articles (Rastrick, 2020; Menegazzi, 2018; Hagland, 2023; Denham and Garnett, 1998; Stone, 1996; and Braml, 2017). The research reveals the different types of think tanks that populate the public policy landscape, the

strategies they employ in different political systems to affect policy change, and the approaches upon which scholars rely to assess or measure policy influence. While much of the focus has been on the efforts of private or independent policy research institutions to provide policy advice, university-based or affiliated research centres are often overlooked or subjected to only a cursory review in the academic literature.

## 6. Private vs university-based think tanks

Private think tanks, or what I call autonomous or independent think tanks, have a long and distinguished record of engaging in timely and policy relevant research. Among the best-known independent think tanks in the United States are the Brookings Institution, the American Enterprise Institute (Wiarda, 2009), the Heritage Foundation, Cato (Leonard, 2019), the Center for American Progress (Abelson, 2018), and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) (Smith, 1993). These institutions have millions of dollars at their disposal, are often overseen by a board of trustees or directors and operate much like corporations. Many of them are registered as not-for-profit, charitable organizations under the Internal Revenue Code, and thus are limited in how much money they can direct to political advocacy (Abelson, 2017). High-profile think tanks, like those mentioned above, are generally staffed with scholars with advanced graduate degrees and experience working at different levels of government. Private think tanks in Canada operate in a similar fashion, although few have budgets that come close to their counterparts in the United States. Examples of independent think tanks in Canada are the Canada West Foundation, the Fraser Institute, the Caledon Institute, the C.D. Howe Institute, the Montreal Economic Institute, and the Institute on Governance (Abelson, 2017).

There are some important differences between private or independent think tanks and those that are located and administratively housed on university campuses. In some respects, university-affiliated think tanks share much in common with private think tanks. Most of the experts working in university policy research centres have PhDs and publish studies on a host of domestic and foreign policy issues. The major difference, other than the disparities in budgets, between affluent private think tanks and those at universities, is the way they are governed. Although most university-based think tanks are supported by private and public funds, the process by which they hire or appoint faculty and the university officials to whom they report, are governed by university policies and procedures. Hiring scholars at most universities is an inherently political process, and staffing a think tank is no different. As will be discussed, university-based think tanks do not generally have the luxury of choosing the people they employ. With few exceptions, these decisions are made by university committees that are often under no obligation to consult with policy research centres. Moreover, while think tanks on university campuses can establish external advisory boards and councils to offer strategic advice, unlike private think tanks, when it comes to hiring scholars, most have little room to manoeuvre. Not surprisingly, this limitation on the autonomy of university-based think tanks to populate their institutes often creates conflicts with their hosts.

Maintaining a presence on a university campus rather than erecting a private think tank in a large city is a risk some donors are willing to take. Indeed, there are those who prefer the cachet and credibility associated with a connection to a distinguished university. This reason is partly why several US presidents, including Jimmy Carter, George H.W. Bush,

Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush, built their libraries and museums at universities. The libraries that former presidents raise funds to erect are not overseen by them or their associates. They are administered and managed by the Office of Presidential Libraries in the National Archives and Records Administration. This office oversees 15 presidential libraries nationwide, including the Reagan Presidential Library and Museum in Simi Valley, California, which sits on land donated by a private developer. In these and other ways, former presidents can also help preserve the integrity of the work being undertaken at these institutions. Problems arise, however, when donors want both the credibility that comes with having "their" institute or centre affiliated with a prominent university or government agency and the unbridled influence to shape its future.

From the beginning, this major problem undermined the work of the Mulroney Institute. Well before the MI opened its doors, Mulroney wanted the credibility that only a university could bestow on his research institute without relinquishing control over how it would be run. StFX was more than willing to work with him in organizing the official opening of the MI at a cost of approximately $250,000 and providing him with an office adorned with a private washroom and shower. When it came to other financial and administrative matters, however, university leaders held firm. Mulroney might have thought that, unlike McGill or Western which are considerably larger, and more distinguished universities that would be unlikely to acquiesce to his every whim, StFX would be more inclined to follow his lead. He was mistaken.

As a former prime minister, fundraiser, and alumnus who is often featured prominently in promotional material circulated by StFX, Mulroney seemed to have convinced himself that he would enjoy considerable influence in all matters affecting the MI. After all, he had raised millions of dollars for the university, was by far its most famous graduate, and had connections in the political and financial world well beyond the reach of most small undergraduate liberal arts universities in Canada. But what Mulroney didn't count on or fully appreciate was that university politics is very different to the politics he encountered in Ottawa or in the private sector. Issuing directives to the StFX leadership as if they were his employees charged with catering to his every whim simply wasn't on the menu. Mulroney no doubt regarded himself as a big fish in a very small pond, but it was never his pond, nor could he rule over the Institute that bore his name. The MI was simply seen by those at StFX as another centre or institute on campus populated by university faculty and staff who were tasked with carrying out assigned responsibilities that aligned with university priorities, not those articulated by Mulroney.

That Mulroney could not exercise unfettered control over "his" Institute was a formidable challenge and disappointment for him. He couldn't hire or fire people, had little sway over a financially strapped university that was incapable or unwilling to pay for projects and initiatives he wanted undertaken, and was never able to convince his alma mater that the MI deserved far more prominence than it received. While StFX continued to depend on Mulroney to raise millions of dollars, in the end, it was Mulroney who required buy-in from the university to fulfil his vision, one that, as discussed, often conflicted with other institutional goals. This was not what he signed up for. Had Mulroney wanted to exercise complete control over an institute that would protect and promote his legacy,

he could have incorporated it as a private, not-for-profit think tank in Montreal, Toronto, Ottawa, Vancouver, or in any other location he wanted. This is exactly what the late Ed Broadbent, former federal leader of the NDP, and Preston Manning, former leader of the Reform Party, did when they left public office. They established private research centres in Toronto and Calgary, respectively. This decision gave them the freedom and latitude to shape their organizations in ways that aligned with their goals and objectives (Abelson, 2017). Given Mulroney's contacts, there is no doubt he could have raised the funds he required to embark on similar initiatives. So why did he elect to accept the invitation from StFX to fundraise for a building, an undergraduate programme, and a public policy institute in Antigonish, a rural enclave not well known for being an intellectual hub for pioneering research?

Mulroney was very proud of his alma mater which he believed had a long tradition of punching above its weight. Indeed, he often remarked that StFX had made a significant contribution to the leadership of Parliament where several of its graduates, including Lisa Raitt, Allan J. MacEachen, Lowell Murray, and the 18th prime minister served with distinction. In this and in other ways, StFX afforded Mulroney the cachet of being affiliated with an undergraduate institution where his political accomplishments would forever be on full display. But he also recognized that promoting his legacy at a small school in a remote location would not be easy, particularly given the institution's culture and reputation as a less than serious academic institution, which, as noted, has caused its rankings to drop in the *Maclean's* annual survey of Canadian universities over several years.

## An imperfect union? Think tanks, universities, and the conflicts that divide them!

At first glance, it would make sense that a natural synergy would form between public policy research centres and institutes and the universities where they are housed. For centuries, universities have provided a privileged environment for students and faculty to engage in the free exchange of ideas. Indeed, developing the capacity to think critically about complex issues from multiple perspectives is the basis for thoughtful and reasoned analysis. Although think tanks are a far more recent phenomenon, originating at the turn of the nineteenth century (Abelson, 2018), they too were established to provide scholars from different academic disciplines with an opportunity to delve more deeply into major domestic and foreign policy challenges. Think tanks give scholars an opportunity to confront policymakers at all levels of government, suggesting practical and well-reasoned solutions to these challenges. Indeed, think tanks were often created to help governments think. Ironically, although think tanks and universities often share the same physical and intellectual space, the union they have fostered has, in some instances, been anything but perfect. In fact, at times their relationship has become volatile.

The relationship between several prominent think tanks in the United States and equally distinguished universities has made clear that in some ways their union is destined for difficult times. Established in 1919 by Herbert Hoover, the 31st president of the United States, the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace has been entangled for decades in ongoing conflicts with Stanford University (Nash, 1988). Disagreements over

funding, faculty appointments, support for various presidential administrations, and the very public controversy over the possible construction of the Reagan Presidential Library, Museum and Public Policy Center at Stanford, are just some of the conflicts that have led to an often-tumultuous affiliation.

On the east coast, ideological and political tensions between Robert Strausz-Hupe, an Austrian-born American diplomat who founded the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI) at the University of Pennsylvania in 1955, resulted in severed ties with the university in 1970 (Wiarda, 2010). And in a much-publicized case, Georgetown University and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), established in 1962, parted company in the fall of 1986 (Smith, 1993). It became apparent that as the stature of CSIS continued to grow, both CSIS and Georgetown became increasingly concerned about how the financial, administrative, and academic priorities of the two institutions no longer aligned.

Given the range of conflicts that can generate and exacerbate tension between think tanks and universities, is the Mulroney Institute destined to experience the same fate as some of its counterparts in the United States?

# 7. Conclusion: the future of the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government

There is no doubt that generations of students will benefit from Mulroney's generosity and those of the donors he brought on board. This being said, if we consider the many problems identified in this paper that plague its operations, the Mulroney Institute cannot remain viable and sustainable, certainly not in the way that Mulroney imagined. Thankfully, the undergraduate programme in Public Policy and Governance will continue to thrive thanks to lucrative scholarships and bursaries that have been established. Whether additional faculty will be hired to support the programme will depend on the university's priorities. The major problem will be how to support the research and public outreach activities of the Mulroney Institute in the absence of an endowment which guarantees a predictable and sustainable operating budget. As noted, Mulroney's decision to hive off close to $18 million from his campaign to refurbish Nicholson Tower was a mistake from which most institutions cannot recover. Moreover, not insisting that StFX contribute a sizable amount of money each year to help support the Mulroney Institute was another major mistake. With no skin in the game, StFX has no incentive to change course, especially after the building they dearly coveted has already been built. Put simply, Mulroney might have had leverage to negotiate tangible engagement by the university when plans for the building and the MI were being conceived, but that leverage disappeared once the building was complete.

One of the few ways the Mulroney Institute can remain viable is by re-inventing itself as an independent entity within the framework of StFX. This is the arrangement the Hoover Institution agreed to at Stanford decades ago, which has afforded it the autonomy to make decisions that shape its future (Nash, 1988, Patenaude, 2019). But for this to happen, millions of dollars must be raised. Freedom comes with a hefty price tag. And even with this liberty, the MI would still reside on a campus where research is minimally valued and where many faculty and administrators have expressed disdain for an Institute forever linked to the Mulroney name.

In the five years the Mulroney Institute has been active, it has managed to build a significant profile on the public policy landscape. It launched a successful book series with McGill-Queen's University Press, issued multiple reports with Environics Research and several other policy institutes in Canada, and hosted many interesting and well-attended public events. The MI has the foundations in place to become an important incubator of ideas. To move forward, the MI should not allow its work to be compromised by a university that doesn't share its commitment to shaping the discourse around key policy issues.

For scholars contemplating heading up a university-based think tank, the story of the MI provides much to consider. First, it should go without saying that it is critical for policy

research institutes to establish a sustainable operating budget, preferably one in which the donor or donors, along with the university, commits themselves to long-term funding. Unless universities invest in policy research institutes in a significant and tangible way, there will be less of an incentive to support the work being undertaken. Although this is easier said than done, there are far too many examples of interdisciplinary think tanks that have come and gone on university campuses because their initial source or sources of funding have been exhausted and the host institution is unable or unwilling to provide financial support until new revenue streams are generated. In short, securing sufficient funds from diverse sources to carry out the mandate of a research institute is vital.

Second, establishing proper parameters and channels of communication between research institutes and donors is essential. Those at universities responsible for drafting donor agreements must insist that external stakeholders be prohibited from interfering in the work of these bodies. For think tanks to become knowledge brokers or incubators of ideas, they must be able to weigh in on complex problems without interference from individuals and organizations with ulterior motives.

And finally, for affiliated think tanks to thrive, they should be built on university campuses with a strong and rich research culture. It is far easier to erect a building than to create an intellectual space in an environment which does not relish the free exchange of ideas. Given the rise of think tanks in the United States, Canada, and in virtually every region of the world, they are unlikely to disappear any time soon. The question is, which universities are ready to support organizations dedicated to shaping public opinion and policy to foster positive economic, political, and social change, both within their campuses and beyond?

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