

# **POLITICIANS' LOBBYING PREFERENCES**

**SPEECH BY JOHN WARHURST AT LAUNCH**

**Mural Hall, Parliament House  
August 15 2006**

Are they trustworthy allies or lying snake-oil salesmen? That is the question.

There have been lobbyists working to influence the Commonwealth parliament, with additional information, argument and threats, since Federation. Before that the lobbying was directed at the colonial governments. When the Commonwealth Parliament moved to Canberra in 1927, lobbyists for the major industry associations followed at the same time. By 1949 Canberra academic identity Professor Fin Crisp (one of the mentors at ANU of many well-known Canberra lobbyists, including David Kindon) could write: "Governments come and go but the lobbyists continue to flutter around power, wherever it lies". By 1984 Labor ministerial identity Mick Young could proclaim (as the Hawke government moved to introduce an ill-fated register of lobbyists): "Virtually unheard of at the beginning of the 1970s, lobbying has become a major profession in the national capital." It remains a major profession in Canberra and the state capital cities, or, as Julian Fitzgerald puts it in his recent book "Lobbying in Australia" (2006) "a billion dollar a year industry employing several thousand people."

The link between lobbyists and parliamentarians is crucial to our democracy. That is true whether you believe, as some do, that lobbyists generally are a self-interested and anti-democratic force in politics or whether you believe, as I do, that lobbyists generally contribute to better governance by providing a crucial community perspective to improve government decisions.

On that basis the more we know about that interaction, and the ways it can be improved to everyone's satisfaction, the better. It is true we already know quite a lot about the process. But lobbying is a profession about which there are many misconceptions.

There should be little excuse for the participants in the interaction not to know a lot about one another's work practices and foibles. In a sense they make up one big family. After all, there is such a constant flow between the two professions. Research by Sarah Miskin and Martin Lumb (Parliamentary Library, 24 February 2006) shows that the previous occupation of the members of this 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament includes at least a third who might already know lots about the link (Political consultants, advisers and lobbyists: 12%; party and union administrators and officials: 14%; and research assistants, electoral officers, etc: 6%). That implies a lot of prior knowledge.

On the other side of the fence many former parliamentarians have put their experience to good use and become senior members of the lobbying profession.

But I would say that even the members of these two distinguished groups-MPs who were previously lobbyists and MPs who have subsequently become lobbyists-have an awful lot to learn from the Committee Bulletin's 2006 Survey of Politicians' Lobbying Preferences.

It is my great pleasure to have been asked to launch the Report on the Survey today. I'll try not to steal any of David Kindon's thunder about the details of the report. In particular I won't refer to the accolades and gongs handed out to certain SIGs. But I do want to say a few words about my impressions of the report, which follows twelve years after Committee Bulletin's first path-breaking Guide to Politicians' Lobbying Preferences (May 1994). That's almost a generation of politicians ago.

It is hard data and it is good data of a kind we rarely see. Some of the general conclusions surprised me. I was surprised, for instance, that such a high proportion of MPs preferred to meet at Parliament House rather than in their electorate. Perhaps that says more about the helter skelter pace of electorate life. I was amused by the one MP who preferred to meet in a hotel or an airport lounge. I also like the cheek of the MP who asked for lobbyists to "bring coffee". And I have learned that approaching MPs at Aussie's to lobby them is out of bounds. On a more serious note I would have found it helpful to have been able to distinguish the ministers from the backbenchers on a number of the questions.

Underlying all of the statistics are perhaps two simple truths. One is the advice from several MPs to "Keep I Simple" and don't make the issues unnecessarily complicated. The second is "One Size Doesn't Fit All". If it did anyone could be a lobbyist whereas in truth the art and science of lobbying successfully is one that relatively few can master. Each politician and each issue is different.

There is a sting in the tail in this survey for Special Interest Groups. That 86 MPs (40%+) have taken the time to complete the survey is a vote of confidence for sure. There is also the general perception among politicians that lobbyists are well briefed and prepared. That's recognition of the standing of the modern lobbying profession in all its diversity (as sketched by Julian Fitzgerald).

But if the answers to three of the later Questions are taken together they are a wake-up call for some SIGs. Q 10: 74% still favor a Register of Lobbyists despite past experience, Q 11: 80% favor a Code of Ethics for Lobbyists, and Q 14: plentiful tips for SIGs on how to better communicate with politicians) I was particularly taken by David Kindon's observation about the answers to the open-ended answers to Q 14 "What tips would you give for SIGs to better communicate with you?": "Many let their views be known in no uncertain terms showing frustration and irritation with many of the techniques and practices employed by SIGS." There is room for improvement and challenges for lobbyists to meet. One challenge is to make better than just moderately good use of the Committee system.

Certainly Client Solutions address these frustrations and irritations in their own stated principles of ethical operation. I particularly liked two principles that I have always sworn by as a teacher and lobbyist: “Seek a win/win solution” and “Provide a solution, don’t just point out a problem”.

I should say that all readers will find this report stylishly presented and illustrated and very clearly organized. You could say that it is a model SIG presentation in itself. The tips are extensive and especially useful both for budding and more experienced lobbyists. The Appendices include all the raw data for you to fossick around in, in order for you to find your own gold nuggets.

Who should this reader be? Well the readers will certainly include future lobbyists such my university students (before or after a parliamentary career) but that is a by-product. I would say that within Special Interest Groups there is something here for both the relatively raw recruit to the profession and for the grizzled old timers who think have seen everything. There are what I would call very practical day to day operational tips about matters like timing, location for meetings, doing your homework about the politician you are meeting, and presentation of your case, as well as strategic dilemmas to chew over about how to respect both sides of an argument and how big to make any claim on government.

There is also plenty here for parliamentarians themselves who I hope will be among the readers. Experienced MPs can see how their practices fit into the general experiences and opinions of their colleagues. Newer MPs should devour it for tips and lessons. I’d like to see a copy put on the desk of every new MP after the next election. It would be a valuable part of any orientation session even for those who already consider themselves experienced political operators. Perhaps the best lesson for politicians is to treat lobbyists as you yourself would like to be treated. The Report suggests punctuality, professionalism and politeness for starters.

But there are other potential readerships for a report that illustrates both the nitty-gritty of policy-making and the demands of the parliamentary life. Public servants, the media, and the private sector would also benefit from a read.

Thank you to Client Solutions for allowing me this opportunity. I recommend the 2006 Survey of Politicians’ Lobbying Preferences to you all and declare it officially launched.

1364 words  
15 August 2006