

FINANCIAL REVIEW

Lobbyists learn to deal with new deck

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Life for lobbyists is about to be shaken up, writes chief political correspondent Laura Tingle.

Businesses are being advised to lobby bureaucrats before legislation appears, and play to divisions within the Liberal-National coalition, if they wish to influence policy in the new era of government control of the Senate.

The move to a government majority in the Senate from July 1 is prompting the biggest shift in lobbying since the 1980s and the Hawke-Keating government. Canberra lobbyists say the tradition of waiting for legislation to emerge, then furiously lobbying ministerial offices or opposition parties to seek changes, will no longer apply.

Gone are the days of what top mandarin Peter Shergold calls "shopping-list legislation" where the bureaucracy and government flag proposals in the hope that some of the items "will gain sufficient support to come forward".

Equally, while there's been growing attention paid to splits between the Liberal and National parties on issues such as the full sale of Telstra, lobbyists are predicting the more complex divisions in the coalition parties themselves between moderates and dries, for example will also come into play.

Long-term lobbyist and principal of Carney Associates, Stephen Carney, says "early intelligence on planned policy or legislative action will be essential to those wishing to influence the process".

"Those with good personal relations with key ministers and/or their advisers and with key bureaucrats will have a better chance to monitor and access that early intelligence than those without good relations," he says.

The director of the Canberra office of Crosby Textor, Jannette Cotterell, agrees, saying business now has to understand the working of the bureaucracy.

"It requires more than just who you know at the ministerial level," she says. "It means understanding the bureaucracy and getting them across the issues."

The chief executive officer of lobbyist Gavin Anderson and Company, Ian Smith, predicts the new Senate structure will mean issues have to be looked at in different ways. The "macro" and industrial issues, he says, will require getting in very early.

But in the area of social policy and services, the diversity within the coalition will start to become more apparent, he says.

With the bargaining now effectively going on in the ranks of government MPs and senators instead of between parties in the Senate the yawning gaps between the coalition's moderates and dries will become clearer and require a much greater understanding on the part of business.

Carney also stresses that point. "Differences in attitude and approach will develop or intensify between the coalition parties when the threat from outside [Labor] is diminished," he says.

"Many of these differences will be over priorities and it will require new insights and understandings for many in business to be able to deal successfully with the subtleties of the new environment."

Until now, a hostile Senate and the perceived threat of the Latham leadership "led the conservative forces to present themselves as an internally cohesive unit, focused only on defeating the threat from the new Labor push".

"That threat no longer exists for the foreseeable future and it is possible that the energies previously expended in fighting the Labor threat will now be reflected in the emergence of philosophy-based groupings within the coalition, fighting for recognition/dominance of the party room."

Carney has had long links with the coalition parties.

"Those with the memory for it will recall the 'dries' of the Fraser government John Hyde, Bert Kelly, Murray Sainsbury and others who met openly in discussion groups and in their own way led to the emergence of the dominant Liberal philosophy of the current government," Carney says.

"I anticipate that the Nationals' senators will develop as a target of early approach for those

wishing to influence government, but the immediate 'triumphalism' of some of the Queensland Nationals will settle into a collegiate but vigorous part of the overall coalition team."

Carney notes that the influence of backbench committee chairs will rise, as will the requirements on ministers to liaise with those committees before introducing legislation.

"The committees will be more or less the only pipelines through which opposition or variation to planned government legislation can get a hearing," he says.