

The Small Business Lobby

John Hyde

The fuss caused by Mr Rob Bastian of the Council of Small Business Organisations (COSBOA) is a blatant example of one of the more serious deficiencies of Australian politics. COSBOA, like a lot of other so-called independent grass-roots organisations, has almost no grass roots membership and is supported by the government---Senator Button's department provides it with a full-time research officer. About a year ago COSBOA did not have enough money to pay Mr Bastian's salary and he sought assistance from the Australian Small Business Association (ASBA). They declined.

Under such circumstances it would indeed be surprising if COSBOA were anything more than a cypher for the government. The use of taxpayers' money to subsidise organisations which pretend independence---e.g. Australian Conservation Foundation, Australian Consumers Association and others---but which weigh into political debates as their bread is buttered, is one of the more successful plays of a government's dirty tricks department.

Mr Bastian is not himself a small businessman and never has been. According to Peter Boyle of ASBA he represents almost no one---his less than eighteen members are business associations. ASBA, which is the principal small business organisation, having about 7,500 small business proprietor members, completely dissociates itself from Bastian. It does so, no doubt, for the good reason that COSBOA is not representative and not independent. At least two of COSBOA's members, the Motor Trades Association of Australia, (MTAA) and the Australian Automobile Dealers Association (AADA) have similarly dissociated themselves from COSBOA's position. The AADA has resigned from COSBOA.

The attention given COSBOA's leaked letter by the media is inexcusable. The Coalition's long-standing policies on industrial relations and capital gains tax are in line with what ASBA has been calling for. (These are policies which would give small business a better competitive edge against big business than it now enjoys.) Any journalist working in the field would be aware of this. He ought to have been alerted by that knowledge and given the surprising substance of leaked letter led to make further inquiry. The partisan

language employed by Mr Bastian ought also to have been something of a give away. Examples are: "Why won't the Liberals accept the existence of a small business sector...?", and the reported assertions that "The Liberals don't have a clue..."; and "Charles Blunt is embarrassed over the Liberals' position"---all good stuff for a tub-thumping political speech. Yet the ABC, and several newspapers, without apparently checking Mr Bastian's credentials, ran his criticism as though it had standing.

Every Federal politician is familiar with the usually unreasonable, sometimes impossible, and almost always selfish demands made by some people purporting to represent the small business sector. The lobbyists get away with it because small business is like motherhood. Therefore most political time-servers agree to the demands until after the election. Some politicians of better calibre, who have more difficulty lying, waffle until after the election. And only the rarest and best, with or without the permission of their leaders, send these lobbyists away with fleas in their ears. They should send them away, because there is no way that any government can satisfy the partisan demands of any more than a small portion of the electorate, however hard it might try.

Finally, let us look at the substance of COSBOA's demands. The Council wants, wait for it, specific commitments from the Opposition on the role of a Small Business Minister, creation of a Small Business Council, enquiry into the needs of the sector, annual reporting to Parliament on the state of small business and a yearly meeting with the responsible State Ministers. There is no mention of labour market deregulation. Mr Bastian apparently see himself as the future Bill Kelty of Small Business, with similar control over government policy. He apparently sees COSBOA as a sort of ACTU---yet another sectional group twisting policies, which ought to serve the whole nation, to its own ends. If it achieved that status, it would have influence without responsibility---indeed it would be about as responsive to small business managers, who mostly are flat out trying to pay next week's wages without worrying about COSBOA, as the ACTU is to rank and file workers. That is, it will be then as it is now: totally out of touch.

This corporatist style of government has failed, and it is the last thing small businessmen and women, of all people, need. In a corporatist world, where the great and powerful reach consensus, small business has a built-in disadvantage. The best that small business can hope for is a level playing field, competitive markets for the goods and services, including labour, it must buy, and a government that does not tax it to death.

We complain constantly about the quality of our politicians. Indeed I have complained throughout the campaign about their failure to face up to the issues. But how is a politician to behave if, when he does not give in to an organisation which ought to be irrelevant, he is treated by the media the way Julian Beale was treated over this issue? There are plenty of other examples: for instance, the way that

Graeme Campbell was treated for speaking the truth about the Green vote. How is a politician to behave when every self-serving lobby, crack-pot organisation or party-political front is treated more seriously than his own more reasoned arguments? The sad truth might be that we get the politicians we deserve---maybe even better.

John Hyde is Executive Director of the Australian Institute for Public Policy

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