

AXING THE QANGOS

Many governments come to office with promises to rationalise regulations and QANGOS (quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations) among their electoral baggage. People are fed up with the cost and above all with the petty restrictions thrust on them by governments and government agencies, so campaign promises to do something about the blight, expressed in very general terms so as not to offend those vested interests who benefit from regulations, are good politics. The term "rationalise" is sufficiently imprecise to avoid embarrassing commitment to specific cuts.

Once in office, new governments find another reason to cut into regulatory agencies and departments: they cost money, the government's books are hard to balance and new taxes are unpopular.

The Burke Government, attempting to axe and amalgamate government boards and agencies follows a well trodden path, but a path which has led most who have followed it to nowhere. No-one can remember what the Fraser Government's much publicised Razor Gang accomplished because it accomplished very little. The idea was first rate, probably the best possible starting point for an attack on big government, but the committee and the cabinet lacked the fortitude to do anything consequential.

Every regulation develops vested interests who will defend it against attempts to eliminate it or reduce its scope. Regulators will go to extraordinary lengths to thwart any attempt to reduce their standing or expenses.

If the State Government were to decide to deregulate say taxis, the travelling public would benefit from cheaper and more convenient travel but well organised vested interests would confront the government.

Senior civil servants of the ilk of Sir Humphrey of the ABC's programme "Yes Minister" would scour their departments for arguments against doing anything which might reduce their authority and the growth of their empires.

The Metropolitan Transport Trust (MTT) and the bus drivers and conductors would not welcome competition from multiple hire taxis, mini-buses or Philippine style "Jeepnies", so they too would take up arms against the proposal. The railways and railwaymen would not want the Perth to Fremantle line to look even sillier, and neither would some elements of the Labor Party itself.

The Taxi Control Board is not going to welcome its own demise and neither are its staff. The taxi owners and drivers certainly will not be wanting further competition. They only believe in free enterprise for others.

Against the clamour of these established interests would be the voice of only those, as yet potential, consumers who would use a service they have not yet experienced. A government bent on cutting has to have a very clear idea of what it is about, and it has to have convictions and courage.

There is little to be gained from reshuffling the regulators. The biggest cost is not the paper war, nor even duplication, which in any case will not be eliminated. The big costs are to be found in policing and above all in complying with the rules. What is therefore needed is the political courage to carry simple repeal bills, getting rid of both the boards and their functions.

If Mr. Burke is not prepared to axe functions his axe will prove to be no sharper than Mr. Fraser's.