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Want to get inside the Prime Minister's head? Unless your name is Janette Howard, you will need a powerful friend in the nation's capital. When the Coalition assumes control of the Senate on July 1, knowing the pressure points inside the Howard Government will be decisive in winning big-ticket campaigns, from selling Telstra to the next round of taxation reform.

With no Democrats or independents holding the balance of power in the Senate, a clutch of Liberal Party insiders and former Howard Government staffers - the lobbyists - stand to gain added clout. With about 950 lobbyists accredited full access to Parliament House, are we in for a stampede as the snouts race for the trough?

First among unequals is Lynton Crosby, the Liberal Party's former federal director who heads Canberra's premier lobbying firm Crosby Textor with Liberal Party pollster Mark Textor.

Other favoured men of influence - and invariably they *are* men - with the contacts to get inside the cabinet room include Gavin Anderson chairman Jon Gaul, who can boast that he has worked on every federal Liberal election campaign since the early 1970s.

Then there is former chief-of-staff to John Howard, Grahame Morris, ex-chain smoker and now chief executive of the Sydney-based firm Jackson Wells Morris. Another player is Andrew Parker, whose firm Parker & Partners was absorbed by Australia's biggest public relations firm, Ogilvy PR Worldwide, four years ago.

Influence doesn't come cheap in this high-priced game of who-knows-who. A one-off lobbying effort accompanied by a decent study - good enough to convince very polling-literate politicians who know good research when they see it - costs a minimum of \$50,000 just for the qualitative and quantitative research.

But for a years-long campaign to fight off regulation of a particular sector, or tax off a particular taxation measure, where interest groups are trying to alter people's behaviour, then you are talking quite a bit more money.

Just for market research, with regular tracking of public opinion, clients should be prepared to invest a minimum \$250,000.

There are also suggestions that some lobbyists charge their clients per meeting - say \$10,000 to arrange an hour-long meeting with John Howard's chief-of-staff, Arthur Sinodinos.

When you include organising committees of backbenchers to sit down and listen to a presentation, or flying around the country to sit down over dinner with groups of journalists to raise the media profile of an issue, the meter could easily run over \$500,000.

At \$750,000 though, Canberra insiders say a campaign has probably reached the limit.

Employing an outsider is not the only option. Umbrella industry groups such as the Australian Industry Group, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the National Farmers Federation, the Pharmacy Guild, and the Investment and Financial Services Association have input into government decision making, and exert a powerful influence.

Many of the bigger companies such as Telstra, Qantas, Westpac, National Australia Bank, Publishing and Broadcasting Ltd and the other big media companies all have their own people regularly walking the parliamentary corridors.

Telstra executives recently told a Senate committee that one-time Liberal staffer John Short had been hired to help smooth the way for the company's full privatisation, at an annual cost of \$400,000 on a four-year contract.

But Mark Textor says having too many people doing your bidding can be a disadvantage. "Look at Telstra. They have so many people in PR and government relations that as soon as anything happens, like the appointment of John Short, they f--- it up."

So, do lobbyists deliver what they promise? Certainly.

When Australia's \$9 billion liquefied petroleum gas industry faced extinction last year from the removal of tax subsidies, a massive lobbying effort through Crosby Textor won continued protection for the new industry.

The lack of a cohesive lobbying campaign can also be your undoing. Just ask the Victorians ruing the loss this week to South Australia of a \$6 billion contract for the construction of three air-warfare destroyers. But is paying someone to lobby the Government a legitimate expression of participatory democracy?

The man who leads the Commonwealth Public Service - the traditional source of government policy wisdom - emerges as a surprising defender of the role outsiders play in shaping public policy.

Peter Shergold, secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, who heads an empire employing 131,000 staff in about 100 agencies, says: "It is vital to work across bureaucratic silos in a whole-of-government way. It's also imperative for public servants to be informed by the perspectives of those organisations who share a stake in the policy decisions of government," he told *The Age*.

Shergold says his initial view after the October election was that the public service needed to exert greater care in drafting legislation. No longer could the departments afford to bowl up "shopping list" legislation in the expectation of having it refined in the Senate.

Control of the Senate brought with it new responsibilities to consult. "My initial views have been strongly confirmed for public servants working on wickedly complex policy such as welfare-to-work or workplace relations reform."

Shergold makes no secret of the fact that the public service door is open to lobby groups and their intermediaries. "I would have around 250 meetings a year to talk to business or community groups," he says.

"In the last three weeks, for example, I've spoken to or met with the Committee for Economic Development of Australia, Certified Practising Accountants, Brotherhood of St Laurence, the board of Goldman Sachs JBWere, Reconciliation Australia and Social Ventures Australia."

Ethicist Jeremy Moss, a research fellow at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics at Melbourne University, is concerned at the role that lobbyists play. "What worries me is that lobbyists may exert undue influence on the political process," says Moss. "They exist for people who otherwise do not have access to the decision-making process. But not everyone can be a lobbyist, or afford to employ one, and to that extent there is an ethical issue. To get access, it takes organisation and finance."

Often on the receiving end of pitches is federal Industry Minister Ian Macfarlane, once a lobbyist himself as head of the Queensland Grains Council. He sees them as essential.

"The good ones are an important part of delivering all sides of a policy argument and are a tremendous pool of specialist knowledge," he says.

"The bad ones think they can slide their foot in the door on the basis of who, not what, they know. This approach rarely fails to disguise the fact they don't actually know much about their issue."

Macfarlane says those who come through the door with a "consistent and well presented message" have the greatest impact. "They shouldn't leave anyone wondering what the meeting's key issue was. Many groups also forget, when the battle's done, to acknowledge good government decisions and those ministers who stuck their neck out for them."

Does he listen to them?

"As a second or third opinion - most definitely. But I also listen carefully to everything my wife says, it doesn't mean I always take the advice without testing it!" he says.

"Everything a lobbyist says to me is run through filters - my advisers, my department - I don't take anything they say at face value. Nothing clouds the message like threats, dishonesty and a lobbyist's assumption that theirs is the higher moral ground in the debate. Narrow self-interest doesn't cut through in this office."

Grahame Morris is quick to defend his fellow lobbyists. "The idea that all wisdom about an industry, or a company, or a particular issue resides in Canberra is bizarre," says Morris.

He believes good ministers - and good governments - require input from a range of stakeholders. "An idea from Canberra may be terrific, but if it's not workable for those who have to implement it then it's not much good."

A lot of the serious business of lobbying is informal, often transacted over a cappuccino at the parliamentary coffee shop, Aussies, which acts as a clearing house for many of the ideas that flow in and out of ministerial offices. When Parliament sits, amid the clatter of coffee cups there is often serious discussion under way among lobbyists, their clients, and political targets, which as a starting point involves key ministerial aides.

The National Press Club, five minutes from Parliament House, also serves as an important lunchtime venue. It's a place where prime ministers, opposition leaders and ministers can ferment policy through its weekly televised debates before tables overflowing with lobbyists and their guests.

After dark, some of these conversations will continue in Canberra's intimate restaurants, where the red wine might be the prelude to a deal won.

Fashions wax and wane, but popular venues for these meetings include Portia's, a Chinese restaurant in the popular Kingston precinct, or the appropriately named Canberra institution The Lobby, opposite Old Parliament House.

Legislation and contracts are also often carved up at places such as city steakhouse The Charcoal Grill, while those especially keen to mix business and pleasure - a popular contrivance with the lobbying fraternity - might kick on to the Holy Grail, a bar especially popular with politicians, their staff and journalists mid-week.

While social interactions underpin a great deal of the lobbying effort, they are only part of a complex picture of friendships and favour.

Underneath the big guns for hire is a second tier of lobbyists that plays a role in helping to streamline government business and influence policy - lobbyists who can get inside the process at an embryonic phase.

As Mark Ridgeway, head of political consultancy AusAccess, says to new clients asking for a ministerial parley: "Why? Have we lost at every level already?" Ridgeway suggests that, by the time legislation gets to a minister's office, it's often too late to change things dramatically. "It pays to think about starting at the lower levels, executive-level public servants," he says.

This process might involve initial contact with public service middle managers - known in the trade as EL1s or EL2s. Calling it the trident approach, Ridgeway says the target lifts to the more senior tier of departmental secretaries, deputy secretaries, and finally the ministry - not just the ministers themselves but their chiefs-of-staff and other advisers.

"You have to be engaged with the top and bottom levels, simultaneously," Ridgeway advises. "You have to take a strategic approach to engage government, which can involve all three levels. Don't look at just seeing one person: strategically engage all levels of government."

So how will business morph in its dealings with the Howard Government after July 1?

With John Howard holding a one-vote majority in the Senate, people who will now tip the scales will be found on the same side as the Coalition. It might be an individual senator,

such as outspoken National Barnaby Joyce, or a group of senators seeking to stand up for their state.

Another tipping point could be those senators who, having been in Parliament a decade or more without occupying a ministerial office, can see a chance to make a name for themselves.

Also empowered as gatekeepers of Government legislation will be the perhaps hitherto dormant Coalition backbench policy committees that will inevitably take over from the once-powerful committees in scrutinising legislation.

Influential backbenchers will include the likes of Andrew Robb, and Australia's richest parliamentarian, former investment banker Malcolm Turnbull.

Grahame Morris offers some advice to the business community looking to influence an outcome. "From July it will become imperative to make a case that is backed up by facts and figures, by economic modelling," he says. "Ministers, advisers and departments are looking for professional advice and, once the Senate changes, those industries or those lobbyists or those companies which have relied on just tweaking something in the Senate will find that their backsides are exposed.

"Instead of trying to change a clause or two to make sure it's okay, they are going to have to start with a blank piece of paper and produce a professional case and a professional argument."