

# Conspiracies and NGOs

GARY JOHNS

**A**S YOU and I slumbered, it appeared that the dear old Melbourne *Sunday Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* had been keeping the world safe for democracy. Unaware that a world-wide conspiracy was abroad to silence NGO activists, we simply missed it, until some brave journalists received a leak, deep from within the bowels of government, that a 'right-wing' think-tank, in league with the Howard Government, had hatched a 'covert project' to 'silence' the non-government sector.

Apparently 'bitter' from the loss of his position as Special Minister of State with the fall of the Keating Government at the hands of 'minorities', the former minister has devoted his every waking hour to avenge his loss, travelling the world to gather co-conspirators, indeed to build a coalition against the non-government sector.

Well, it is confession time. I am that person, and I did it.

It is true that the Institute of Public Affairs runs an NGO Project. And every piece we have written has been 'overtly' published on the Web. ('Hey, Mike and Don [co-conspirators], why don't we have a competition to rename our (c)overt operation?')

In recent years, just like many academic researchers, we became aware of the enormous growth in civil activism in Australia and internationally, and decided to research it. Given that the IPA is part of the sector, and is in favour of liberty and the rule of law, we concluded, not unreasonably, that private associations should be responsive to their members. Nevertheless, we argued that, where NGOs seek to affect pub-

lic policy, particularly where they receive public funds or have high-level access to government, we thought it best that those funds and those relationships be 'overtly' disclosed to the public.

Because of these views, the Commonwealth was approached to see if it was interested in developing a study of the relations between the government and NGOs. The IPA was awarded a contract to undertake a research study entitled, 'The Protocol: Managing Relations with NGOs'.

The project is part of the work programme of the Prime Minister's Community Business Partnership, and aims to develop a 'trial protocol' for public disclosure of NGO standing with Government. The objectives of the project are to make information about NGOs that have relationships with Government 'overtly' accessible and to increase awareness of the relationships between NGOs and Government.

The research recognizes the right of free association of NGOs and will not seek to erode their privacy, nor seek to expose any confidential material. The focus is on the rights of the government and the taxpayer to know enough about an NGO to make an informed judgement about granting access and resources.

As a separate matter, although related to disclosure of public resources, the IPA made a submission to the Charities Review and has recently responded to the Treasurer's Charities Bill 2003 Exposure Draft. The IPA does not wish to restrict criticism of public policy by recognized charities, or anyone else for that matter.

Nevertheless, with the wider definition of public beneficial work—

moving well beyond the welfare sector—and the changing nature of such work—towards political advocacy—it is timely to ask what activity is assisted by taxpayer funds. To the layman, advocacy work means lobbying. It means lobbying government to change the law and/or provide programmes for the purposes that the organization argues are beneficial. A government is well within its rights to define what should and should not attract a public subsidy.

The difficulty is, how much lobbying is too much lobbying? The Commonwealth could follow the US path of specifying how much lobbying may be undertaken by charities. However, it is probably unwise to be too specific about how much policy work is acceptable. After all, governments want policy work from NGOs. A way through the need for public scrutiny and the insistence that charitable work involves lobbying, is to let the donors decide.

If charities were required to publish how much money they spent in raising their funds, and how much they spent on policy work, then donors could decide whether or not to give. The donor market would be better informed, not just about the 'cause', but the efficiency with which the funds are gathered, and how much is spent on the conferences, education and lobbying.

There you have it, a major 'overt' conspiracy on the part of your IPA, to have your government disclose its relations, 'overtly', with the unelected non-government sector. Who's 'bitter'? I love my life!

*Dr Gary Johns is a Senior Fellow with the Institute of Public Affairs*

**IPA**