



2013 – A YEAR WHEN PARLIAMENTARIANS LISTEN

By Bob Lawrence*

Prime Minister Gillard has decreed September 14, 2013 as the next Federal Election date. For companies and organisations whose future prosperity and competitiveness are tied to regulatory outcomes, funding or policy directives at the Federal level, early 2013 is the prime time to approach political parties and parliamentarians.

It is simply a fact of corporate life that if organisations want their views and thoughts turned into effective policies, or wish to become involved with an existing or planned government initiative, funding or sales opportunity, it is essential to engage soon and to do it effectively. FIRST Advisers is well placed to assist any client in such engagement.

We provide here some historical perspectives and anecdotes on how this works in the Australian political setting.

Policy Initiatives

Cynics have noted that the months leading up to an election is a time of heightened awareness of issues by parliamentarians.

So the early months of 2013 are the best time to have your ideas heard and responded to by all political parties. The best outcome is for a political party to take up your policy, call it their own (with no credit given to you for fear of being seen as a lap dog) and roll it into a smaller or larger form emblazoned with the party's logo. All Ministers and Shadow Ministers are called on by their party secretariats to offer up new policy initiatives ahead of an election to ensure product

differentiation ahead of the campaign. Party committees and think tanks also throw policy initiatives into the thought pool.

The famous Hawke Government 'Button Car Plan' was in fact an industry devised plan that Malcolm Fraser read but did not activate. New Industry Minister John Button was pleased to take it to Cabinet and the industry gave it the 'Button Car Plan' label. He got the credit, they got their way and hundreds of millions of dollars with it.

Ahead of the 2007 election, an industry body client of mine had a sound proposal. We politically readjusted it, presented it to the relevant Minister in the incumbent Howard Government with a psychological \$97 million cap. Any policy faces oblivion from the conservative forces if there is no capped ceiling figure. The Coalition Minister took up the policy, added in his own sub-policies and inflated my cap by one-third while accentuating its employment generating and environmental benefits. It became policy. The Labor Opposition took the policy, bettered it with a higher figure, and on winning government my client industry benefitted by more than \$130 million from this "Rudd Government initiative".

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If you are:

- a company or organisation keen to promote your investment project to the relevant Minister(s)
- a company keen to improve your client base by enlisting the Federal Government as a customer for your goods or services
- a body keen to engage the Government as a sponsor

then 2013 should be viewed as a year of opportunity and action when it comes to building or establishing relationships with Canberra.

Now is the time to revive old plans and finalise them or crystallise your thinking on new ones. Work out how it can be implemented, preferably in stages, with attached costings. The plan will gain impetus if it benefits a wide spectrum of the electorate.

It is best to have the plan taken up by an industry association in which your company is a participant. It will give it added political weight and is not seen as helping a single company. The industry group, through its registered lobbyist should then take the plan to relevant Ministers, Shadow Ministers and political party head office Policy Directors. The Federal Government has established a Register of Lobbyists with associated conduct rules to limit corrupt practices. So it is important to be aware that approaches must be made through a Lobbyist on the Register to ensure appropriate conduct and rules are observed. FIRST Advisers is represented on that Register.

Do not be surprised if your policy reemerges as a Party policy with a broader scope that includes helping a section of society with a history of disadvantage. This could be the aged and/or infirmed, lower income earners, the young unemployed or regional communities. Alternatively, the environment is another high response beneficiary. Such expansion gives greater voter appeal and acceptance to the policy.

Policies should be promoted to political parties and Ministers in the first quarter of 2013 before election policies, and printer's proofs of documents, are finalised.

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