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* Unfettered lobbyist access to Beehive should be scrutinised

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Dr Bryce Edwards takes a closer look at changes in the lobbying scene around Wellington in the wake of the formation of the Labour-led Government.

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IGPS associate Dr Bryce Edwards asks whether New Zealand needs a policy to restrict 'revolving door' moves by political staffers straight into lobbying

It’s a great time to be a lobbyist. Lobbyists are in big demand at the moment, and have more opportunities to find influence. They can thank Jacinda Ardern and Winston Peters for this – whenever there's a change of government, it is a time of rapid reform.

The politicians who suddenly find themselves with power to re-write the rules and re-distribute resources are always keen to move fast to get things done. The ideas that politicians had in opposition are now readied for implementation, new legislation is drawn up, and new rounds of consultation begin with stakeholders and supporters.

It's a key time for lobby groups and professional lobbyists to strike, and it is usually when they can wield the most influence in trying to shape what the government does.

Lobbyists might want to hold the government to promises they’ve made, or they might want to encourage the new government to water-down their plans, or maybe they want to influence how and where the new government will spend its budgets.

The lobbyists attempt to gain influence with new governments simply by being useful – they provide expert advice and information. But often their leverage is the result of representing powerful forces, and therefore new governments have to take them seriously, or at least be willing to listen to their ideas and demands.

Already we've seen an interesting case study of the power of lobbyists on the new Labour-led government, over employment relations. After it was formed, the new government announced that as part of its 100 days of action, it would repeal the National Government’s 2010 "Hobbit law" in which film and television workers were automatically deemed to be contractors rather than employees. This law had been passed under urgency a few days after Hollywood executives flew to Wellington to ensure the Government was willing to make it worth their while to film *The Hobbit* here.

The new Government was quick to agree to an urgent meeting with film business representatives. The result, once again, is that the lobbyists get a win – the new Workplace Relations Minister Iain Lees-Galloway has announced a backtrack on the plans to repeal the legislation. Instead, a working group will be set up involving employees and unions to find a way forward.

**Concerns over lobbyist influence on democratic process**

Lobbyists are going to be very busy over the next year, trying to influence this government. But they are going to have to be very careful, because in recent years there has been rising public concern about the power of lobbying on the democratic process.

All around the world, lobbyists have become a focus of suspicion for a public concerned about issues of inequality, the power of big business, and eroding democracy. "Vested interests" are seen as a barrier to developing a better world. It is widely accepted that those with money are able to get better access to politicians, and are able to leverage this to get their way.

Citizens seem keener than ever to reduce the power of business and vested interests, and of the lobbyists that push their agendas. Hence the new Speaker of Parliament, Trevor Mallard, has embarked on a review of which lobbyists get parliamentary accreditation – i.e. swipe cards which give them automatic access to the halls of power in Parliament.

There might also be moves during this parliamentary term to regulate the power of these "Swiper-ati" and other lobbyists involved in the political process. This has long been a concern of the political left; all three coalition partners have expressed a desire in the past to regulate lobbyists. In fact, Green MPs tried and failed to pass a private members bill that would fetter those professionally engaged in trying to influence the politicians.

New legislation to regulate might well emerge, but it will need to be very sophisticated and well-thought through. Lobbying is a complex area, because it’s difficult to define and to delineate lobbying from normal political activity.

It's one thing to reduce the political power of big business, but this can also mean that other political groups get caught up in the process. For example, how much do we want trade unions or environmental groups regulated by the state in what they can say and do about politics?

There is certainly a need for much more focus on companies that are specifically set up to lobby politicians. Although the lobbying industry isn't as big and visible here as it is in places like Washington, there are numerous companies in Wellington that specialise in getting access to, and influencing, politicians. It's big money, and those rich enough can hire them to further their interests.

**New lobbyists on the block**

The latest lobbying company in town is Australian firm Hawker Britton, which specialises in leftwing politics. Its arrival isn't random – it’s come into the market simply because we now have a Labour-led government, and there’s money to be made from a firm that can influence leftwing government ministers.

The new Hawker Britton director Neale Jones started work this Monday after finishing work last Friday in Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's office.

He has been working in the Labour leader's office for the last few years, most notably as Chief of Staff, so is able to take to the new firm his access to politicians as well as insider knowledge on how politics and the Labour Party works. He will be able to charge corporates large amounts of money so they can influence friends and ex-colleagues in Labour and, of course, this will help those clients make even larger amounts of money.

Laws exist in many countries to restrict this behaviour. An example is a rule against the "revolving door", whereby officials and politicians go from being part of the government one day to a new lobbying job the next. Many countries require a mandatory "cooling off" period, which makes this behaviour slightly less compromising.

Neale Jones is only the latest political public servant to switch straight to a lobbying role. It's become quite common for ministerial staff in particular to take advantage of their skills, insider knowledge and contacts to start new careers.

Another recent example is Jenna Raeburn, who went straight from Gerry Brownlee's office to set up Barton Deakin, a firm that specialises in lobbying National politicians and has the same owner as Hawker Britton.

All of this makes the public suspicious. Too often, those around the Beehive look like one big political class, concerned more with looking after each others' interests than making a better world. However, the public is wising up to this so look to see a demand for lobbyists' wings to be clipped, or at least for a lot more sunlight on their activities.

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