

# Primer

## Briefs

### Wrangling Lobbyists

New rules a step toward stemming public distrust

It's easy to imagine that a lobbyist's work is all about hosting hundred-dollar lunches in oak-panelled steakhouses for a chance to whisper in the ear of a beguiled cabinet minister. "It isn't, unfortunately, that sexy," says lobbyist Bruce Young, who once served as former prime minister Paul Martin's senior adviser for B.C. and is now the founding principal of the Vancouver office for government-relations firm Earncliffe Strategy Group. More likely, Young says, his lunch involves a sandwich at his desk while reading through a bureaucrat's 250-page report on behalf of a client who needs to know what's going on behind the granite in Victoria.

Lobbying's negative stereotype is unfortunate, Young says, considering that his profession – and he emphasizes this word – is an important part of a healthy democracy.

Lobbying in B.C. got a bit more professional on April 1, when amendments to B.C.'s Lobbyists Registration Act came into force. The gist of the act is to spell out who exactly is a lobbyist and get them all to list their activities in a public online registry. It also introduces more stringent enforcement. Under the original law, introduced in 2001, government overseers had no powers to investigate or punish those who violated the act. The registrar now has investigative powers as well as the ability to impose fines (of up to \$100,000 for repeat offenders) and ban offenders from lobbying for up to two years. Young strongly supports this new effort to regulate his industry, saying

anything that makes the profession more transparent and accountable is a step in the right direction.

Still, stricter rules won't fix the fundamental irony of the lobbyist's condition: being mistrusted by the general public while at the same time serving an important role as an intermediary between government bureaucrats and the business community. Young explains that business leaders dealing with government need help from professionals who understand how government works, and public servants need input from the private sector to make good decisions. Young says his job often involves little more than setting up meetings between public officials and their counterparts in the private sector. For example, Young says, "if you were going to do something involving the web and modern technology, why would you not want to talk to a senior guy at Microsoft?" A lobbyist will facilitate the meeting.

The input that lobbyists bring to government is a key part of making good policy, agrees David Emerson – and he should know. Emerson has been on all sides of the equation in his rich career: in the private sector, as the CEO of companies such as Canfor Corp. and the Vancouver International Airport Authority; in the public service, in roles such as B.C.'s deputy minister to the premier and deputy minister of finance; and as an elected official, as the federal minister of foreign affairs, industry and international trade. (He's currently executive chair

of B.C. Transmission Corp.)

"Public servants are in an institutional trap, which blinkers them in terms of where they get their information and what perspective they bring to a problem," Emerson says. And without front-line input from the business community, he adds, "they're going to make bad policy."

Of course, knowing how much trust to place in lobbyists is tricky. Emerson cautions that the information they bring can be misleading



and unreliable, especially if they rely on big contingency fees for successfully affecting policy or securing funding for a client. On the other hand, if lobbyists are ostracized too much, you get a situation like the “terrible” one in Ottawa today, Emerson says, where the fear of scandal has caused a breakdown in communication between government and business. (After the lobbying controversy surrounding former MP Rahim Jaffer, the fed are now pushing for even

stronger rules.)

Lobbyists today are fighting a rising tide of popular distrust, says UVic social policy professor Michael Prince. “For a lot of Canadians, it’s the murky underside of business and politics, something not brought up in polite company.” And despite the important role lobbyists play and the many rules governing them, winning popular trust and respect will be an uphill battle. “Over the past 20 or 30 years, we’ve become a more skeptical, cynical,

questioning populace,” Prince says. “These guys are swimming against the tide.”

Bruce Young doesn’t dwell on the stereotypes. “Am I sad that every citizen who reads an article about a quote-unquote ‘lobbyist’ doesn’t understand that the overwhelming majority of lobbyists are thoughtful, engaged citizens?” he asks. “No profession would permit itself to be judged based on bad apples.”

– Peter Severinson

**A TOUGH SELL:** Lobbyists may have a bad rep, but Vancouver lobbyist Bruce Young says they’re no different than lawyers or accountants, who have their own bad apples too