

5

Non-government organisations

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Non-government organisations (NGOs) have been an indispensable part of Australian society and politics for decades. Organisations such as the Red Cross, the Brotherhood of St Lawrence, Oxfam and the Australian Conservation Foundation, along with thousands of smaller organisations all around the country, are admired and respected not just for the services they deliver to marginalised and disadvantaged groups but for their contribution to public debate and the democratic process.

There are as many as 700 000 organisations that make up Australia's diverse not-for-profit sector, including sporting clubs, surf-lifesaving associations, churches, private schools, reading groups and so on.¹ Most of these organisations are not generally considered by governments to pose any direct threat to their authority. Many provide social services, education and research, cultural and recreational activities, health services, and employment and sectoral support through business and professional

associations and unions. But included in this broad grouping is a subset of organisations that consider they have an important role—in part or in whole—as ‘extra-parliamentary representative bodies’ or policy advocates.² This chapter is concerned with the threats to this advocacy aspect of NGO work including the lobbying, consultation and advice activities that make a direct contribution to the debates that inform our public policy processes.³

Debate is fundamental to the development of good public policy. Good policy must reflect a range of perspectives and be based on knowledge of real people’s lives and experiences. NGOs are the repository of an enormous amount of information about how things work in their part of the world and governments today simply cannot make effective policy without access to that bank of knowledge. At times this will mean that governments must endure public criticism of their policies and programs. Despite the discomfort that this process may produce, a mature government with a commitment to a robust and deliberative democracy must recognise that criticism from NGOs provides a kind of feedback loop by which they can be informed of problems or inadequacies in their development and implementation of policies and programs. Advice from those organisations closest to the problem will help governments provide the best services and develop the best policies for all members of a society.

Successive government inquiries have endorsed this view of NGOs as providing an essential contribution to Australian democracy. In 1991 the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs (HORSCCA) reported on its inquiry into the funding of peak health and community organisations. The report recommended continued Commonwealth funding ‘on the basis that public education, public debate and

community consultation assist the development of appropriate policies and programs, especially where disadvantaged groups are concerned'.⁴ In 1995, the Industry Commission inquired into the role of charitable organisations. The announcement of this inquiry had caused much concern in the NGO sector due to the fact that the commission was seen by many NGOs as 'an instrument of neo-classical economic surgery'.⁵ Nevertheless the Industry Commission report, like the HORSCCA report, recognised the legitimate role of peak community sector organisations as 'representative organisations' that provide 'advocacy and representation (among other duties) . . . for its members and other interested parties'.⁶

In 1996 a further independent review of peak non-government organisations by RPR Organisational Consultants provided a more detailed inventory of the sector's democratic contributions, suggesting that NGOs:

- provide access to the views of disadvantaged or marginalised groups to improve the development and design of policy and programs;
- provide expertise and knowledge about the needs and circumstances of specific groups in the community;
- promote public debate needed for good policy;
- offer an efficient source of national dialogue on issues that cross state and territory boundaries;
- assist in the process of accountability of government to the wider community by providing feedback on the effects of policy; and
- present important perspectives and information which can counter or balance the views put forward by other organised interests, such as business groups.⁷

It also suggested NGOs can facilitate wider community understanding of policies. These views are echoed in a wide range of academic and other research that notes the importance of the non-government sector in liberal democracies. NGOs provide 'democratic legitimacy' when they are involved in public policy processes that see citizens as central to solving community problems,⁸ they reduce the social isolation that leaves people vulnerable to xenophobic and racist appeals,⁹ and they enhance public accountability and participation through opening up state administration to a democratically conceived 'citizen-based community'.¹⁰ In other words, far from undermining democracy, there is widespread support for the view that the extra-parliamentary representative role that NGOs play when they act as advocates in public policy processes is, in fact, essential to a healthy democracy.

Other liberal democracies have recognised the benefits of a more engaged relationship between NGOs and governments. The attempts by the Australian Government to close down or marginalise all but the tamest NGOs stand in stark contrast to developments in the role of civil society in other liberal democracies, where frameworks for NGO-government relations are being built or rebuilt. In Canada, for example, the federal government and the NGO sector (called 'the voluntary sector' in Canada) have been working together to develop a partnership-based 'Accord'.¹¹ Similarly, in Britain the Blair Government has worked to develop a 'compact' with the voluntary sector there.¹² While these new arrangements are certainly not perfect—and critics remain on both sides of these relationships—they do at the very least constitute an acknowledgement of the essential contribution that the NGO sector makes to public policy and to democracy itself. They are a far cry from the approach that has been taken in Australia.

Governing for the mainstream?

In Australia, recent years have seen an unprecedented attack upon NGOs, most particularly upon those organisations that disagree with the current federal government's views and values. The attacks have come both from government itself and from close allies such as the Institute of Public Affairs. Questions have been raised about NGOs' representativeness, their accountability, their financing, their charitable status and their standing as policy advocates in a liberal democracy such as Australia.

The most public and visible attack on NGOs has been led by the right-wing Melbourne think tank, the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), which first came to prominence in the 1980s when, backed mainly by the mining industry, it was instrumental in developing and promoting the policies of economic rationalism. The IPA now has close connections with the American Enterprise Institute, one of the principal sources of neo-conservative ideas that have so heavily influenced George Bush.

In the worldview of the IPA, NGOs are seen as 'selfish and self-serving' interest groups with little representative legitimacy. The vast store of knowledge of disadvantage and marginalisation held by NGOs is dismissed. Instead, they are seen as a group of professional stirrers who are not really interested in the welfare of those they claim to represent, but want only to feather their own nests, keeping their salaries and building their power bases.¹³ This is a view largely informed by public choice theory.¹⁴ In the public choice paradigm, actions such as policy advocacy, participation and consultation are to be avoided, as they are little more than a ruse designed to disguise the purely self-interested motives of the 'well-organised minorities'¹⁵ who dominate Australian NGOs,

and whose true motivation is really what is known disparagingly as 'rent-seeking', or the pursuit of additional funding and greater power and influence for their leadership.¹⁶

The IPA has been particularly critical of the legitimacy of NGOs in the policy-making process and has urged the federal government to withdraw financial support from NGOs that engage in advocacy. It argues that NGOs often 'invent' social and environmental problems and undermine the legitimacy of elected representatives in democratic states, referring to them as a 'tyranny of the minorities'.¹⁷ Relying primarily on inflammatory rhetoric, the IPA has persisted with the argument that NGOs undermine the sovereignty of constitutional democracies, using pejorative descriptions of the NGO sector, such as 'the compassion industry', a 'dictatorship of the articulate' and a 'tyranny of the minorities', in its efforts to discredit the advocacy work of these groups.¹⁸ Needless to say, this has not been well received by some charities. Oxfam has criticised the IPA's 'ongoing smear campaign against charities, welfare and aid agencies' and its 'ongoing vilification of organisations that campaign for human rights, corporate social responsibility and environmental protection'.¹⁹ Nevertheless, in a recent publication on this issue the IPA has continued their call for greater regulation and restriction of the NGO sector.²⁰

There is an uncomfortable match between the IPA's campaign against NGOs and the known views of Prime Minister Howard and several of his parliamentary colleagues. Prior to Howard's election in 1996 he outlined his view that there is a 'frustrated mainstream in Australia today which sees government decisions increasingly driven by the noisy, self-interested clamour of powerful vested interests with scant regard for the national interest'.²¹

More recently, in an address to the Menzies Research Centre, Howard repeated his pledge not to govern ‘for the boutique interests of the few while ignoring the everyday concerns of the many’, vowing that ‘the politically articulate would not dominate at the expense of the unorganised mainstream of Australian society’.²² It seems that both representing a minority and doing so in an organised manner are sins in the Prime Minister’s eyes.

But the Prime Minister’s public views do not always match his government’s more covert behaviour. Other highly organised groups that are active in policy debates, notably business interests, escape the tests of ‘mainstream representativeness’ demanded of NGOs, despite the fact that they are clearly self-interested. Parliament House in Canberra is almost literally surrounded by expensive office buildings occupied by well-funded and highly effective business lobby groups. No one questions their right to exist and demands that they be made accountable to the community. A business minority is more acceptable to the Prime Minister than say a minority of community advocates, disability campaigners or environmentalists.

We now know from doctoral research by Guy Pearse that for a decade the Howard Government’s climate change policies have been not so much influenced but actually written by a tiny cabal of powerful fossil-fuel lobbyists, self-described as the ‘greenhouse mafia’, representing the very corporations whose commercial interests would be affected by any move to reduce Australia’s burgeoning greenhouse gas emissions.²³ This group consists of the executive directors of a handful of industry associations in the coal, oil, cement, aluminium, mining and electricity industries. Almost all of these industry lobbyists have been plucked from the senior ranks of the Australian Public Service, where they wrote

briefs and cabinet submissions and advised ministers on energy policy. The members of the 'greenhouse mafia' claim to be more familiar with greenhouse policy than the government, because they are the ones who wrote it.

Several members of the mafia have rotated from one industry lobby group to another within the greenhouse network. As a result of the closeness of the personal and political connections within the network, Pearse concluded that the greenhouse mafia is probably the most potent lobbying alliance in Australia. Most of its members have been operating in Canberra for two decades, making their way up the bureaucratic ladder under Labor and Coalition governments. While Cabinet deliberations, ministerial committees and preparation of Cabinet submissions are meant to be confidential and beyond the reach of lobbyists—indeed, the unauthorised disclosure of Cabinet-in-confidence materials is a crime—the greenhouse mafia has 'unrivalled access' to internal government processes. Members of the greenhouse mafia even admit to being called in to government departments to vet and help write Cabinet submissions and ministerial briefings, referring to 'mutual trust' between the lobbyists and the bureaucrats (whose seats the lobbyists once warmed). 'It is about fixing the outcomes,' one said.²⁴

But where Howard disingenuously talks of the 'mainstream' in his critique of NGOs, his colleagues are a little more transparent in their views of what is wrong with the advocacy work of these organisations. As the existence of the greenhouse mafia demonstrates, the problem is not influence per se, it is about *who* has influence and the sorts of values that inform their advocacy work. There is a clear agenda to restrict NGOs concerned with social justice, human rights or environmental protection. When these organisations step over an arbitrary, government-drawn line

they become what Queensland Liberal Senator Brett Mason has called ‘political wolves in charity sheep’s clothing’.²⁵

In the government view, such organisations must be constrained. In a 2005 speech to the Sydney Institute, Special Minister of State Eric Abetz proposed a new ‘accountability regime’ for charitable organisations that campaign on matters of policy. Abetz made special mention of the Wilderness Society and the RSPCA which, he claimed, ‘were not only campaigning to influence the policies of the major parties [on forest policy and the banning of live exports, respectively], they were also effectively campaigning in favour of the ALP’.²⁶ The message to NGOs could not be clearer: if you’re not with us, you’re against us and we will make life hard for you.²⁷

As these observations attest, the shifting relationship between NGOs and the federal government has not been driven solely by a different conception of the functioning of democracy. The relationship has been heavily influenced by the political objectives of the government. It is not NGOs as such that have been targeted but those NGOs that are seen to have an agenda that differs from that of the government. While there is a general view that NGOs have had too much influence and have too loud a voice in the public debate, certain NGOs have been spared criticism and threats, and indeed have been actively cultivated through increased public funding and the promotion of individuals to various government boards and bodies.

Taming strategies

While the World Wide Fund for Nature Australia (WWF Australia) appears to have had a close relationship with the Howard

Government since the 1996 election, the events surrounding the enactment of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) were a turning point in this relationship. This Act brought wide-ranging and controversial changes to Commonwealth environmental laws. There was sharp disagreement among the larger environment groups about the merits of these legislative changes and debate about whether they should publicly support the Bill. The endorsements of the Act provided by WWF Australia—joined by three other smaller groups—contrasted with the often scathing criticisms made by opponents of the legislation, including the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), The Wilderness Society (TWS) and Greenpeace.

After the legislation was enacted, people associated with WWF Australia and the other supportive groups were appointed to serve on federal government environmental advisory committees. WWF Australia was also awarded a contract to disseminate information about the Act among environment NGOs. A report in 2004 concluded that WWF has enjoyed extensive financial support from the Howard Government, with a five-fold funding boost since 1996.²⁸ Total grants over the period amount to more than \$15 million, with almost \$20 million allocated since 1998–99, nearly all of it from the federal government. Funding to other environment groups, notably ACF and TWS (both of which were critical of the EPBC Act), has been slashed.

An analysis of the public statements made by WWF Australia and other environment organisations about the Howard Government's major environment policies shows WWF Australia's comments are mostly favourable, and sometimes highly complimentary, to the Howard Government. WWF Australia's statements

reflect positions frequently at odds with those of other major environment groups, which are sometimes critical and sometimes supportive of Howard Government policies. WWF has also bestowed on the government several awards for its environmental achievements, including three Gift to the Earth awards, which the Environment minister displays on his office walls. In the course of the last election campaign WWF issued a joint media release with the government praising the latter's environmental achievements.

This history provides grounds for questioning whether WWF Australia can legitimately continue to describe itself as independent.²⁹ This perceived loss of independence is of considerable importance as it undermines WWF Australia's role in public debates about government policy and raises questions about whether it has misled its supporters and the general public. Because the public is justified in asking whether the opinions and activities of other groups are influenced by governments and businesses, the standing of all environment NGOs in the community could be jeopardised. It seems that WWF is being used by the Howard Government to endorse unpopular environment policies as the government often deploys WWF's name and statements in an effort to give credibility to controversial government policies. However, since Greg Bourne took over as chief executive of WWF Australia in 2004, there are signs that the organisation is taking a more independent stance, particularly on the issue of climate change.

A similar strategy of divide and rule has been applied by the Howard Government in the welfare sector. Organisations that have been critical of the government, such as ACOSS and the Brotherhood of St Lawrence, have been frozen out of debates and positions of influence. Others that have been friendly to the government have been favoured with funding, contracts and

appointments of senior staff to various boards and inquiries. Two of the most favoured organisations have been the Salvation Army and Mission Australia. The rise in influence of the former CEO of Mission Australia, Patrick McClure, who played a prominent role in debates concerning the introduction of the GST that was in some respects counter to the position of other major welfare groups and more aligned with the government's position, is a case in point. McClure was subsequently appointed to head the government's review of the welfare system, which produced a report that became the blueprint for the Howard Government's controversial approach to welfare reform,³⁰ and is now a member of the government's Community Business Partnership. He was made an Officer of the Order of Australia in 2003.

The view from the NGOs

How do NGOs perceive this new and more hostile political environment? To answer this question, in 2004 the Australia Institute conducted a survey of Australian NGOs that include some advocacy in their role.³¹ The survey explored how they get their messages out, their main audience, whether they are generally supportive or critical of government, barriers they face in being heard, their perceptions of government attitudes to debate, and whether they believe that dissenting views are welcomed or discouraged.

The web-based survey was sent to approximately 750 organisations that have some advocacy role. In total, there were 290 responses. The distribution of respondents by state and main field of activity was consistent with expectations, with the most

SILENCING DISSENT

important sectors being social justice and welfare (27 per cent of respondents), groups representing family, youth and older people (15 per cent), environment groups (12 per cent), human rights (11 per cent), disability and mental health (11 per cent) and women's organisations (9 per cent). While they cannot be named for confidentiality reasons, most of the largest and best-known NGOs responded to the survey, as did many small and medium-sized ones. The results provide a reasonably accurate reflection of the mix of views held by Australian NGOs that engage in advocacy.

Respondents were first asked whether they see themselves as supportive or critical of the federal government, and how this compares with the previous federal government. Not unexpectedly, NGOs are more likely to be critical than supportive of government policy—only 5 per cent say they often support federal government policy while 58 per cent say they are often critical. When asked to compare, respondents said that they are more likely to be supportive of the previous rather than the current federal government. NGOs find the current federal government to be less sympathetic to their concerns than the previous federal Labor Government—58 per cent say they are often critical of the current federal government while only 26 per cent say they were often critical of the previous government. This fact may explain why the Howard Government has adopted a range of strategies to silence NGOs. A similar though more muted pattern occurs at the state level.

When asked how successful they think they are in having their messages heard by government, there was a wide disparity among groups, depending in part on the area in which they work. Women's groups are the most likely to believe that their efforts are 'not at all successful' (43 per cent), with only one women's group

believing that it has been highly successful. Groups representing families and older people were the most likely to say that they are being heard by government, with 13 per cent reporting they are highly successful and only 6 per cent reporting no success.

Social justice and welfare groups are divided in their perceptions of the willingness of governments to listen. These groups simultaneously report the equal highest percentage of respondents who believe that they are highly successful in having their message heard by government (13 per cent) and one of the highest proportions of respondents who believe they are not at all successful (28 per cent). There is evidence that this sector has been divided between those that have aligned themselves with the federal government (through, for example, accepting contracts to deliver services) and those that have remained more independent and critical.

The survey asked respondents to indicate the main barriers faced by NGOs in getting their message heard. While 38 per cent said that lack of media interest is 'often' or 'always' a problem, only 18 per cent believe that media indifference is 'rarely' or 'never' a barrier to getting their message heard. Three in five (61 per cent) said that the federal government is 'often' or 'always' not interested, with only 34 per cent saying the same about state governments.

Perhaps most disturbingly, the survey uncovered the extent to which governments use various methods to silence or intimidate its critics among NGOs. Clearly, any organisation that depends on government for funding gives government a hold over it. Among NGOs that receive government support, around 70 per cent report that their government funding at times restricts their ability to comment on government policy, although only

SILENCING DISSENT

14 per cent say that this happens 'often' or 'always'. The results suggest that the more government funding an NGO receives, the more constrained it feels in making public criticisms. Some are required to consult the minister before making public comments, including having media releases vetted by the minister's office or the department. Others have been forced to remove from their publications and websites text seen to be critical of the government.

Many commented on implicit pressure to censor themselves. In the words of three:

While not openly stated, it has been unequivocally conveyed that 'We do not fund organisations to criticise us'.

The perception is that you toe the line or you risk getting defunded.

It does have a chilling effect, however, wondering whether critical comment may ultimately affect our funding security.

Some make a conscious decision to avoid being compromised. As one wrote:

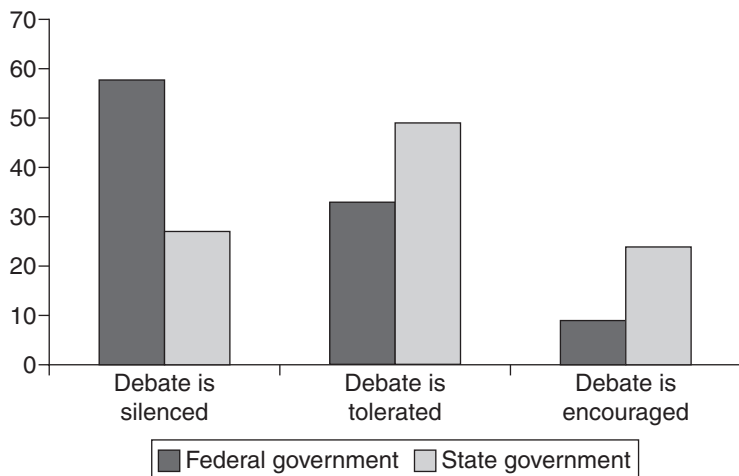
We don't take government funding so we can criticise them.

And another:

To have no government funding is liberating.

It is widely believed among NGOs that the federal government and, to a lesser extent, state governments want to silence public debate. When asked what they think the attitude of the

FIGURE 1: Attitudes of state and federal governments to debate (%)



government is to debate in their area of interest only a small minority of respondents believes that debate is encouraged by the federal government (9 per cent), with 58 per cent believing that debate is silenced and 33 per cent believing it is tolerated (Figure 1). State governments are perceived less negatively, with around half believing that debate is tolerated and around a quarter each believing that debate is either encouraged or silenced.

Respondents were asked to express their agreement or disagreement with a number of statements about the role of dissenting voices in Australian public debate—see Table 1. Three quarters of respondents (76 per cent) disagreed with the statement that ‘current Australian political culture encourages public debate’, with one quarter disagreeing strongly.

SILENCING DISSENT

TABLE 1: NGO perceptions of the role of difference and dissent in Australian public debate (%)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Current Australian political culture encourages public debate.	25	51	20	3
NGOs are being pressured to amend their public statements to bring them in line with current government policy.	3	23	57	17
The Australian media provides a forum for a range of perspectives in public policy debates.	13	46	37	3
Individuals and organisations that dissent from current government policy are valued by the government as a part of a robust democracy.	42	50	6	2
Dissenting organisations and individuals risk having their government funding cut.	3	7	61	29

Similarly, 90 per cent of respondents believe that dissenting organisations risk having their funding cut. In the words of one:

Peak bodies have had to tread very carefully in terms of retaining funding agreements during the Howard Government.

Three quarters (74 per cent) believe that NGOs are being pressured to make their public statements conform with government policy.

In addition to the threat of defunding, respondents identified several methods used by government to silence critics. As one respondent stated:

It's done very cleverly—by selectively destroying organisations, defunding, public criticism, ministerial interference and criticism, excessive auditing and 'review'.

Management of consultation processes is something many NGOs are familiar with.

It is clear from our funding contract with Government that it sees our role not as a peak body in a democratic society but as a mechanism to help the Government 'get its message out' and help the Government implement its policy objectives.

NGOs see the Howard Government as particularly skilful at using diversionary tactics.

Government is very clever at pre-emptive announcements . . . Also clever at keeping the debate on its own terms through

SILENCING DISSENT

public comment, question time in Parliament and denial of problems by consistently producing Government's record rather than considering what still needs to be done.

This perception of the diverse range of tactics adopted by governments is widely shared. In particular, many respondents singled out the way that the federal government seeks to undermine the reputation and challenge the credibility of its critics, something it does both publicly and privately. Denigration and public criticism is a commonly used method.

The Fed Govt strives to silence or weaken debate by Fed Govt ministers or parliamentarians openly denigrating certain sections of the community. This influences community opinions even though the community is not in possession of all of the facts.

Automatic visceral attacks on opinions counter to party line.

Persistent dismissal of contrary views by Government; attacks on the credibility of NGOs.

Bullying was referred to by quite a few.

Reactions to public comment are extreme . . . e.g. phone calls from senior staff keen to reduce further public debate.

Threats, bullying, personal attack unless debate is 'commissioned' by and 'controlled' by the Agency.

What next for NGOs?

As these survey results indicate, the threats to NGOs go far beyond empty political rhetoric. Since 2003 the government has escalated its attacks on the NGO sector through a range of strategies designed to restrict the advocacy capacity of the sector as a whole.

In 2003, the government commissioned the IPA to carry out an ‘audit’ of how NGOs relate to government departments. The government and the IPA kept quiet about the \$50 000 contract until it was revealed in *The Age* newspaper in August of that year. This secrecy was ironic given the IPA’s campaign for ‘greater disclosure and accountability by NGOs receiving funding from and working with government agencies’.³²

In the resulting report, titled *The Protocol: Managing Relations with NGOs*, the IPA expressed its concern that NGOs are provided with privileged access that distorts the functioning of democracy, arguing that: ‘In many of their relationships with Departments, NGOs are granted privileges that are not available to members of the public. These privileges are primarily through the receipt of funding and the gaining of access.’³³ In light of what we know about government’s close and secretive links with business lobbies such as the greenhouse mafia, these claims appear to be either naive or deliberately misleading.

The report recommended a ‘protocol’ for increasing scrutiny of the relationships between NGOs and government, using the language of transparency and accountability—as if, when left to their own devices, these organisations are bound to misbehave. The strategy is disingenuous: rather than focusing on *what* NGOs have to say to government, which may often be critical, the IPA

focuses on *who* is speaking and *how* they are communicating, effectively shooting the messenger to avoid hearing the message.³⁴

In a parallel strategy, also in 2003, Treasurer Peter Costello undertook to introduce a Charities Definition Bill that would disqualify charities that engaged in advocacy work, other than that which is ancillary and incidental to their main purpose. The threat was that, under the new definition provided in the Bill, lobbying or advocacy could result in the loss of an organisation's charitable tax status³⁵ or status as a deductible gift recipient (DGR). As many foundations can only donate to organisations that have DGR status (which makes the tax deductibility of donations possible), this could result in the indirect defunding of many such organisations. Although the government subsequently announced that it would abandon most of the draft Bill and would retain the common law definition of charity, many NGOs remain concerned that there will be a crackdown on their charitable status should they continue to engage in advocacy work.

These fears were strengthened by a draft tax ruling released in May 2005 in which the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) stated that '[p]olitical and lobbying purposes are not charitable. While such purposes may use educational means, this is not sufficient to show a charitable purpose', although the ATO did allow that 'political or lobbying activities that are merely incidental to a purpose that is otherwise charitable do not by themselves prevent that purpose being charitable'.³⁶

Although the final decision may rest with the Australian Tax Office, it seems the process of implementing this regime will also be political. Early in 2005 Federal Minister for the Environment Ian Campbell wrote a letter to environmental NGOs that

explicitly threatened to use the tax system to constrain their advocacy work. In the letter Campbell warned that organisations' tax-deductible status was dependent on their working on 'the conservation of the natural environment and not for any other purpose, such as political activity'.³⁷ It can be no accident that various entities of The Wilderness Society (TWS) were subject to three audits by the Australian Tax Office over the two years to the middle of 2006. None of them concerned the honesty of TWS's tax payments. They were entirely about the 'political' activities and charitable status of the environment group. The ATO found that TWS was entitled to maintain its charitable status but warned it about political activity. It would appear that the Howard Government is using the ATO to target its critics.

These continued attacks on the advocacy work of NGOs, along with the survey responses described above, paint a bleak picture of the state of public debate in Australia, suggesting a high degree of coercion on the part of Australian governments. Although frustration is expressed at state governments, it is apparent that the federal government is perceived by NGOs as being especially intolerant of dissenting voices. Many NGOs are reluctant, if not afraid, to speak out. While state governments are also guilty at times of pressuring NGOs to conform, the Howard Government's willingness to smother dissent poses a disproportionate threat to the democratic process in Australia.

As a result of these shifts many disadvantaged groups that had taken years to organise themselves sufficiently to have a voice have found themselves increasingly excluded from the policy-making process. It is not surprising to find that there has been a serious deterioration in relations between the federal government and NGOs in recent years, to the point where many believe they have

SILENCING DISSENT

been 'frozen out' and others fear they will have their funding withdrawn or tax status threatened.

The outcome for the broader Australian polity is that the knowledge and breadth of experience collected together in the NGO community are having much less influence on how we develop as a society than they should. Like individual citizens, community groups are being worn down and are increasingly reluctant to engage in the democratic process because they no longer believe that they can make a difference. At the same time, certain influential business lobbies have been brought into the fold, along with a few tame or uncritical NGOs like Mission Australia, the Salvation Army and WWF. There are grounds for serious concern that the longer this continues the more difficult it will be to reshape and rebuild the structures of democratic participation.