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Role of Lobbyists

The main goal of a lobbyist is to influence parliamentarians to debate and vote on legislation in a way that advances the interest they represent, and influences the decision-making process.

The supposed origins of the term 'lobbyist' vary. One view is that lobbying comes from the gathering of members of Parliament and their peers in the hallways, or *lobbies*, of Houses of Parliament at Westminster before and after parliamentary debates.

Another source speaks of the appearance of the term as early as 1820 in the American Congress with lobbying said to depict persons who make representations to decision-makers in order to influence public policy.

The opportunity to lobby members of Parliament is widely regarded as a right of citizens in a democratic polity.

Such activity has always been a part of the political scene, and remains so. As was said by a member in the Legislative Assembly on 17 October 2007:

“Every day constituents, businesses and other organisations lobby their local, state, and federal representatives by email, telephones, and Australia Post.

They sign petitions, demonstrate outside of Parliament, hold meetings and make direct representations and presentations to ensure their personal, professional, economic, and/or ethical interests are understood by the decision makers.

All these activities give individuals and organisations the opportunity to have their say, to press their case, to apply pressure, to influence decision making, to sway opinion and to push, promote and urge decision makers to their point of view.

Indeed, elected representatives often actively canvass the views of their constituents and special interest groups.”¹

In March 2007 a Contact with Lobbyists Code and a Register of Lobbyists were introduced.

These came into effect in August 2007. The Code provides rules for contact between lobbyists and ministers, parliamentary secretaries, ministerial staff, and public sector employees.

The Register provides information on who is engaged in lobbying activities with government and whom lobbyists represent in their dealings with government.

The Director General of the Department of Premier and Cabinet has the discretion to refuse a lobbyist registration.

It is specified in the Code that lobbyists:

- shall not engage in any conduct that is corrupt, dishonest, or illegal, or cause or threaten any detriment;
- shall use all reasonable endeavours to satisfy themselves of the truth and accuracy of all statements and information provided to parties whom they represent, the wider public, governments and agencies;
- shall not make misleading, exaggerated or extravagant claims about, or otherwise misrepresent, the nature or extent of their access to institutions of government or to political parties or to persons in those institutions; and
- shall keep strictly separate from their duties and activities as Lobbyists any personal activity or involvement on behalf of a political party.

For more information about the Contact with Lobbyists Code or Register of Lobbyists, visit www.lobbyistsregister.dpc.wa.gov.au.

¹ Dr E. Constable, WA Parliamentary Debates, 17/10/07, p.6342

