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# The Politics of NGOs: Empowering Marginal Groups in a Climate of Micro-management and Distrust

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*The role of peak NGOs in Australian civil society is considered crucial for representing marginal groups in the public and policy arena. The Howard government had particularly challenged the advocacy, coordination, information, research and policy role of peak NGOs. Instead of dealing with NGOs, the Howard government developed a 'governing through communities' process establishing new arrangements between the Federal government and local communities. It is of concern that 'governance through communities' may directly erode the values of voluntary association, broad representation of diverse groups in society and may negate non-instrumental political relations that NGOs aim to contribute to a healthy democracy. How the new Rudd government relates to peak NGOs is thus worthy of close analysis to understand what democratic role especially peak NGO's will play in Australian civil society,.*

## Introduction

There is broad consensus that non-government organisation's (NGOs) roles in Australia and their relation to the Howard government drastically altered since 1996 (Melville 2003; Hamilton 2004; Smyth 2004; Kent 2006). NGOs relationships with the Federal government were under considerable strain, as the Howard government emphasised the contractual service delivery role of non-government organisations and sought to severely limit the advocacy role of all NGOs (Melville 2003, Hamilton 2004, Smyth 2004, NCOSS 2004, Kent 2006). NGOs are defined for the purposes of this article as showing the following characteristics: being non-profit or a non-profit-distributing organisation (meaning no one profits from the activities of the agency and only staff are paid for their work in the agency), self governing usually through some kind of representative community management group, relying to some extent on volunteers and having an advocacy function representing marginal groups in society (Phillips 2004, 1). Some well-known examples of NGOs are the Red Cross, Brotherhood of St Lawrence, Community Aid Abroad, Australian Council of Social Services, Amnesty International, Women's and Men's groups and refugee advocates (Hamilton 2004, 1-5). '[T]here are some 100,000 incorporated NGOs in Australia with a further 13,500 that are either collectives or companies with limited guarantee' (Lyons 1999, 2), involving 1.5 million volunteers in Australia (ABS 2000).

NGOs are generally understood to play a 'critical political role because when they 'speak directly to public need and lead collectivities to devise effective solutions to public problems', they can overcome 'cynicism and distrust' that tends to stifle civil society and political engagement (Frumkin 2002, 29). NGOs

worldwide have come under criticism from neo-liberal governments, public choice theorists and right-wing Think Tanks for not being democratic (Staples 2006). The most significant attack on NGOs has been on their role as policy advocates for the poor and marginalised in society. The advocacy role of NGOs was attacked by public choice theorists, such as the Institute of Public Affairs who referred to various NGOs as 'selfish' and 'self-serving'. This right-wing Think Tank, the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) in Melbourne was then commissioned by the Howard government to carry out an 'audit' on how NGOs relate to government departments (Hamilton 2004, 5; Staples 2006). Smyth responded to the IPA portrayal of NGOs as a threat to our democracy by pointing out the various ways in which the Howard government built the 'silencing of dissent' into the contracts between NGOs and the Federal government (2004, 1). Smyth advocated that NGOs contributed important diverse opinions and advocacy in the policy and civil society sphere and that without them the political debate in Australia missed out on a broader range of views, especially the voices of the marginalised and poor.

## Restricting advocacy

The relationship between NGOs and the Howard Government in relation to NGOs advocacy and policy work had 'completely broken down', according to Melville (2003, iv), for several reasons. According to Hamilton those NGOs receiving government funding were at times severely restricted in their ability to comment on government policy (2004, 11). '[S]ome are required to consult the Minister if making public comments including media releases and media releases have to be vetoed by the Minister's office or department (Hamilton 2004, 11). The expectation of the federal government was that NGOs were

'required to promote government policy'(Sidoti 2003,1). Explicit 'specific prohibition against making any public comments' or statements that 'may be interpreted to be critical of the relevant government program' were part of the contractual relations between NGOs and the Howard government (Sidoti 2003,1). Confidentiality clauses were used to ensure that those agencies providing Job Network employment services...refrained from speaking out about the effects of the Job Network policy on disadvantaged groups (Staples 2006, 9).

The Howard government made advocacy difficult for all NGOs by defunding especially peak NGOs. Peak NGOs are bodies that:

...provide advocacy, representation, coordination, information, research and policy development on behalf of member organisations within a given sector or representing a specific section of the population (such as children or women's services, the ageing, people with disabilities, people from non-English speaking backgrounds) (Sawer 2002, 40).

Prior to the Howard government, peak NGOs were 'consulted in the process of policy development and gave evidence to parliamentary inquiries and at the committee stage of relevant legislation' (Sawer 2002, 40). Under the Howard government's 'mainstreaming government' notion, peak NGOs were forced to amalgamate. The reason given by the Howard government was 'that [it] would assess all particular interests against the sentiments of mainstream Australia' (Sawer 2002, 39). These forced amalgamations with the stated aim of "mainstreaming" groups made it more difficult for groups to advocate on specific interests. This "mainstreaming" notion is in line with '[p]ublic choice theorists [who] reject the pluralist concept of many voices in society debating public policy to develop a consensus' (Staples 2006, 5). The Howard government also created its own peak, a 'government non-government organisation' called the Not for Profit Council of Australia (Staples 2006, 13). This group was considered unrepresentative of the NGO sector and was unlikely to represent the most marginal groups in society (Staples 2006, 13).

Since the 1970s Australian governments had funded peak NGOs to ensure the representation of people who did not have the resources to have their voices heard in public policy debate and policy development. The view was that 'the funding of representative bodies should not be tied in any way to government priorities' as an

...integral part of the consultative and lobbying role of these organisations is to disagree with government policy where this is necessary to represent the interests of their constituents (Sawer 2002, 41).

In 1998 the first peak advisory group defunded by the Howard government was the Australian Youth Policy and Action Coalition (AYPAC), 'for criticism of the government's common youth allowance' (Sawer 2002, 44). It was quickly 'replaced' by the National Youth Roundtable in 1999, which was presented by the Howard government as more 'democratic' than a peak NGO because ordinary people could speak directly to government without the barrier of a peak (Sidoti 2003, 3). This kind of representation fails to recognise the level of policy expertise, policy research and influence possible through well-considered input into policy-making by a peak NGO. Indeed recommendations from the Youth Roundtable include establishing just such a policy research and advocacy body!

Between 2000 and 2002 twenty nationally funded peaks were defunded in Australia (Staples 2006, 8). Some of the defunded peaks were the Australian Federation of Pensioners and Superannuants, National Shelter (had been resourced by successive governments for 23 years) (Sawer 2002, 44), the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) and the Association of Civilian Widows and the Coalition of Australian Participating Organisation of Women (CAPOW). As Sawer has pointed out, these were peaks representing some of the poorest and most disempowered Australians (2002, 45). Other peak bodies had their

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funding severely cut and strings attached to any public comments. For instance the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) was required to provide the Government 24 hours notice of any media release and there was a veto over any material containing departmental facts

and figures (Sawer 2002, 46). Ministerial round tables where NGOs could have input into policy were reduced in frequency and became tightly controlled and focused on the government's agendas (Sawer 2002, 47). ' In 1999 the majority of women's NGOs (some 40 out of 60) received letters disinviting them from the round table, and informing them that selected 'prominent individual women' would be invited in their place (Sawer 2002, 47). The concern is that NGOs representing the resource poor were displaced from their role in advocacy and policy analysis. According to Sawer this means that many sections of the community are

currently unrepresented in any substantive sense, and this affects negatively 'the quality of democracy and the quality of public policymaking' (Sawer 2002, 48). How the new Rudd government alters these relations with peak NGOs to ensure substantive representation by those who are resource poor is thus highly significant for the quality of Australian democracy and public policy making.

Social justice rhetoric allowed NGOs in the past, according to Everingham, to 'identify new issues of concern and monitor the government's performance, making the government account for their performance in terms of their social justice rhetoric' (2003, 132). Now with the rise of the new managerialism the government can monitor the performance of NGOs and measure

***...many sections of the community are currently unrepresented in any substantive sense, and this affects negatively 'the quality of democracy and the quality of public policymaking' (Sawer 2002, 48)***

their success as set by the 'terms of the government's economic reform agenda' (Everingham 2003, 132). This shifted power to the Howard government and delimited the capacity of NGOs to lobby on the part of marginalised groups. More than just silencing dissent, Sawer identifies how 'mainstream government' plays into increasing:

Suspicious, fears and resentments of difference... rather than [these being] allayed, ...[they] are turned against the pursuit of social justice or of more inclusive forms of democracy (2002, 43).

A healthy democracy is understood to put differences on the public table and robustly debate them without jeopardising access to policy-making forums and processes of consultation, or incurring retribution, such as being defunded or having funding cut or tied to not advocating on behalf of the resource poor. The Howard government was uncomfortable with dissent and treated it with suspicion. This attitude markedly diminished the political robustness of Australia's civil society and reduced politics to elitist and centralised governance without open debate. The Howard government 'value[d] control and brooks no opposition', according to Sidoti (2003,1). As Sidoti states it 'should surprise no one that all but the bravest will be subdued if not silent' (2003).

The role played by NGOs in providing a voice for marginalised groups in policy making has led to significant improvements in social provision over time. Such achievements however were dismissed as biased and self-interested by the Howard government

(NCOSS 2004). Recently Australian charities have boycotted 'welfare to work' measures and accused the Prime Minister John Howard of attempting to recruit them 'to implement deeply unpopular welfare policies' (Kent 2006, 1). These charities felt that they were being asked to do the Government's 'dirty work'. The Anglican Church, Catholic Social Services Australia, Brotherhood of St Laurence, St Vincent de Paul Society and Uniting Church all boycotted this regime (Kent 2006, 2). They found the welfare to work policy too punitive and they refused to cooperate in denying 'payments to single parents and disabled people for 8 weeks for breaching job search rules' (Kent 2006, 2).

Staples states 'Howard referred to the NGO sector as 'single-issue groups', 'special interests' and 'elites' and he promised that his government would be 'owned by no special interests, defending no special privileges and accountable only to the Australian people' (2006, 4). As with the Youth

Roundtable the Howard government expressed a preference to work directly with Australian people, with the ordinary people who do not represent any special interests and are not elites. Howard's approach indicated the direction of change in how his government programmes were conceptualised and his view of the 'form and function of the state' (Murdoch and Abram 1998, cited in Herbert-Cheshire 2000, 204). For example, in 2000 'the Commonwealth Department of Transport and Regional Services released the Regional Solutions Programme allocating AU\$90 million to assist regional and rural communities experiencing high levels of economic and social disadvantage' (Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins 2003). This Programme 'sees the responsibility [for economic success] lying in the hands of communities and their leaders....Communities need attitude to succeed' (Herbert-Cheshire 2000, 204). The process for engaging with communities was through workshops with residents, farmers and local people, ordinary people. These workshops were indicative of '[n]ew institutional and administrative arrangements' (Herbert-Cheshire & Higgins 2003). Through workshops individuals and communities were to learn how to assist themselves to become activated and to acquire 'the capacities to govern themselves responsibly' (Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins 2003).

#### **Governing through communities**

The rhetoric of communities developing the right approach to their own futures by taking responsibility for themselves reflects neo-liberal ideology and is said to require the 'rebuilding [of] the foundations of mutual trust, recognition and support across the work of the

non-state public sector' (Everingham 1999, cited in Herbert-Cheshire 2000, 204). 'Government rhetoric aimed to politicise communities and to encourage communities to think beyond their own individualistic desires and to act on behalf of the communities that command their allegiance' (Herbert-Cheshire 2000, 204). Even though NGOs are generally understood as already exhibiting these traits of mutual trust and support across a range of networks, NGOs were not a feature of this governance through community. Rather through various consultation processes, rural communities in Queensland for instance were being trained to 'become aware of the ties that exist between them and their (potential) community...to think themselves into existence' (Herbert-Cheshire 2000, 205). This denies the mutual assistance and self-help efforts already effectively operating in many communities often mainly organised through various NGOs. The Howard government aimed to 'govern without governing society' and to 'govern through community' (Herbert-Cheshire 2000, 204).

The ideology of self-help and of self-government was less a matter of appropriating any technical qualifications but rather it was about the 'process of psychologically preparing individuals to reach a level of capability for self help' (Herbert-Cheshire 2000, 206). It is taking up this 'entrepreneurial culture' that was supposed to be the source of empowerment for local community members. As Solas (1996) has observed: 'empowerment comes to be defined simply as a process which heightens an individual's capacity to act on his or her own behalf, regardless of the structural constraints which restrict the outcome of that action' (cited in Herbert-Cheshire 2000, 206). Empowerment of ordinary community members in this process seeks 'to transform the attitudes and behaviours of individuals — under rhetoric of empowerment — in a way that is compatible with governmental ambitions' (Herbert-Cheshire 2000, 206). However, Herbert-Cheshire indicates that :

...community-based strategies for self-help will increase the division and inequality in rural towns by empowering a small, fairly powerful minority who are better positioned to mobilise themselves. Those whose voices need to be heard most are more likely to become 'disempowered' by the continual decline of government support (2000, 207).

At the same time as NGOs were undermined in their policy and advocacy roles, so-called communities were encouraged to take on 'self-governance'. However, according to Herbert-Cheshire, 'it is not so much

control as the added burden of responsibility that is being devolved to local people' (2000, 203). By shifting service delivery to the community directly these new institutional and administrative arrangements indicate a broader shift from 'government to governance' (Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins 2003, 1). This 'governance through community seeks 'to govern without governing society, to govern through regulated choices made by discrete and autonomous actors' (Rose, 1996, 328, cited in Herbert-Cheshire & Higgins 2004, 289). This arrangement of 'governing through community' does not 'provide a welfare safety net to all disadvantaged groups, but supports communities who are able to make a case that their capacity to identify and implement development opportunities needs building' (Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins 2003, 5).

What Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins (2004) are suggesting is that 'governing through community' was promoted through pre-determined policy frames established by the Howard government. The choices of communities were regulated, indeed if communities wish to access funding for projects they have to present themselves as possessing such positive characteristics as 'optimism, consensus, collaboration and interdependence' (Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins 2004, 295). As Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins state, the

***... 'governing through community' was promoted through pre-determined policy frames established by the Howard government.***

relationship between communities and experts who provide 'seemingly independent advice and assistance to rural communities in the absence of state directives is regarded as vital to the success of local self-help initiatives' (2004, 295). However, as Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins point out these processes

... expose rural people to the norms of conduct that are said to characterise responsible healthy communities, they also facilitate the process in which rural people act upon and transform themselves according to these norms, through the provision of support and training (2004, 295).

These norms of conduct may be fine norms but the 'manner in which decisions have been constructed and the reasons they have been provided' have to be opened up to debate, influence and to the possibility of change in a civil society (Lehman 2005, 10). Civil society exists where there are 'free associations, not under the tutelage of state power' (Taylor 1990 cited in Lehman 2005, 6). This means that policy debate, the ability to influence and change policy is an important aspect of civil society in a democratic society.

The consequence of positioning communities as self-governing entities also needs to be assessed in relation to the effects on peoples' everyday lives and life plans. The devolution of responsibilities to local people — ordinary community members — may result in or maintain continuing injustices and oppression. There is a need for mechanisms that highlight and address such effects. Further, arrangements need to be put in place that can question the 'colonising force of instrumental reason and the narrow and technical conception of civil society' (Lehman 2005, 11). Policy analysis and advocacy are essential for providing people with alternative understandings of new arrangements and processes. As Lehman states:

NGOs have attempted to provide the type of activity and information that would fulfil the aims and objectives of a civil society in a broader sense; that is, a society where people are able to seriously influence the policies implemented in society (2005, 11).

Under the Howard government policy making reflected the dominance of the executive arm of government at the policy level in Australia (Melville 2003,vii). The policy debate in Australian civil society has been seriously and alarmingly diminished through neo-liberal forms of governance and the silencing of dissent (Sawer 2002; Sidoti 2003; Maddison, Denniss and

Hamilton 2004; Staples 2005). As Melville states, peak NGOs and relations with the Howard government 'reflect[ed] deep misunderstanding and mistrust of each other' (2003, 11). How these relations between peak NGOs and the new Rudd government develop is thus an important aspect of civil society and the quality of democracy and public policy-making in Australia.

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### Monday

*Colours had run like lipstick on an old woman's mouth,  
the pattern still there – an unfulfilled day  
dragging itself from dawn to dusk.  
Trying to catch the colours, contain them in firm  
contours  
I changed the light grey down to heat blue noon  
until night took over with Hamletian despair.  
No self-contracted rest, no order in the chaos of this  
fading day.  
I fell onto the swirling floor trying to hold the spectrum,  
not to achieve or master any patterns,  
simply pretending I had started somewhere.*

Mocco Wollert,  
Keperra Qld

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