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NCOSS Conference Paper

# **Advocacy!** 12 March 2003

## **Delegitimizing the Voice of Peaks- challenges to the advocacy and public policy roles of community-sector peak bodies**

Dr. Rose Melville, Arts Faculty University of Wollongong  
Roberta Perkins, Peak Body Study (2000-2002)

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Council of Social Service of NSW (NCOSS)  
ph: 02 9211 2599 f: 02 9281 1968 e: info@ncoss.org.au  
w: www.ncoss.org.au m: 66 Albion St, Surry Hills NSW 2010, Australia

### **Authors**

**Dr. Rose Melville**  
Senior Lecturer  
Sociology Program  
School of Social Science, Media and  
Communication  
Arts Faculty University of Wollongong  
Wollongong NSW 2522  
e-mail rosem@uow.edu.au

**Roberta Perkins**  
Senior Researcher  
Peak Body Study (2000-2002)

This paper reports on some of the major findings of a study entitled 'Changing Roles of Community Sector Peak bodies in a Neo-Liberal Policy Environment in Australia' funded by an Australian Research Council Grant (2000-2002).<sup>1</sup> The University of Wollongong conducted this study.

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<sup>1</sup> Melville, R., Perkins, R. 'Changing Roles of Community Sector Peak Bodies in a Neo-Liberal Policy Environment in Australia' forthcoming, University of Wollongong, NSW 2522.

## **Introduction**

In Australia, two of the main functions of community-sector peak bodies have been representation and advocacy on behalf of disadvantaged groups in policymaking and service delivery issues.<sup>2</sup> Since the late 1930s, government funding has been provided to enable peaks to participate in this "extra parliamentary" democratic process (May, 1996: 252). All political parties at state and federal levels of government have recognised the proposition that disadvantaged people are not adequately represented through the usual liberal democratic parliamentary institutions and processes (Sawer, 2002). Several major government inquiries (ICCCI, 1995; HORSCCA, 1991) have recommended that funding be maintained. At the same time, it is acknowledged that the advocacy role of peak bodies has led to an uneasy and sometimes conflict-ridden relationship with government ministers and departments. State support of peak bodies remained unchallenged until recent times, when the impact of public choice theories and New Public Management reforms swept the Australian public sector in the 1980s and 1990s (Melville, 1999a).

Since that time state and federal governments have seriously challenged the legitimacy of social activism and advocacy. It has been a particular hallmark of the Howard Government, which campaigned during the 1996 federal election campaign on a platform of 'governing for the mainstream' (Sawer, 2002; Melville, 1999a). Vested interest groups are seen as counter-productive and consuming a disproportionate amount of funding and resources. A process of 'delegitimation' of the claims of these groups has been taking place in the executive levels of government and in funding relationships with government. A chronology of this process and its implications for peaks has been documented in various other papers (Melville, et al, 1998; Melville, 1999b, 1999c, 2001, 2002; Melville and Perkins, forthcoming).

People often ask why these changes are taking place at this point in our history. It is often argued that advocacy and democratic citizenship is being curtailed because of the push towards globalisation and the need for nation states, such as Australia to fit into the new economic order. The price Australia must pay to remain competitive in a world economic system is to cutback on welfare state functions and funding. However, it goes further than this, a rigid adherence to economic rationalism also means that the state has less tolerance for public discontent and citizen activism (Bardouille, 2000). Three research projects have been tracking the challenges to advocacy organisations, such as peak bodies during the past 7 years.<sup>3</sup> One of the main purposes of research projects is to test the hypothesis those advocacy organisations, such as peak bodies, are systematically being excluded from policy making and defunded because of their advocacy work.

### **A National study of community-sector peaks**

A national study of community sector peak bodies was undertaken between 2000-2002 by the University of Wollongong, funded by the Australian Research Council Grant. A database of 350-400 peaks was compiled in the course of the project. From this database, 142 peaks were surveyed, or 42% of peaks that were invited to participate in the study, and 89 peak executives and senior government officers were interviewed. A working definition of a "peak body" was developed from

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<sup>2</sup> Not all peak bodies claim to provide advocacy for the organisations they represent or the people who use the services of their member organisations. The major role of some peaks is educational, industry monitoring and standard setting.

<sup>3</sup> Two Australian Research Council small grants conducted between 1997-1999 (including a pilot study of 24 peaks) and an ARC Large grant 2000-2002.

the 132 suggestions provided by survey and interview respondents. A review of the literature on Australian peaks indicated a plethora of theoretical viewpoints but very little empirical research. This study is the first to conduct a substantial statistical profile of peaks across the country and combine this with extensive interviews providing a large amount of data about the policy and funding environment of peaks. A review of the literature on overseas studies of peak bodies indicated significant differences between Australian peaks and similar umbrella organisations in other countries. The main difference between countries is in the degree of incorporation into extra-parliamentary and government advisory institutions and mechanisms, and the level of core government funding provided to these kinds of organisations.

## Demographics of peaks

The 142 surveyed peaks were spread unevenly across all states and territories, with almost 42% of them in New South Wales. A third of the peaks were national organisations. Nearly two-thirds of them were founded since 1970, and more than half were formed from grass roots responses. The peaks were distributed evenly across all sectors. The activities that most often engaged peaks time and energy were the dissemination of information, networking and advocacy. The survey found that two-thirds of the peaks had an organisational membership of less than 120, and only two had more than 500 member organisations. This is reflected in peak staffing. Thirty percent (30%) of peaks employed either one or two full-time staff, and only two had more than 500 staff members. The small number of staff was a surprising finding of the study. Yet the amount of work expected by organisational members and funding departments is constantly increasing. For example, bureaucrats can expect CEOs to read and digest policy documents containing several hundred pages and provide informed opinions or options within 48 hours notice. It is also reflected in the peaks financial resources. Two-thirds of the organisations had an annual income of less than \$400,000 and 15% with more than \$1,000,000. The income of 100 surveyed peaks derives mainly from federal and/or state/territorial government funding as indicated in Table 1.

**Table 1. Govt. funding as % of income (N=142)**

<u>Government Funding</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>Percent</u>
<u>Less than 50% annual income:</u>		
Federal Govt funding only	15	10.6
State Govt funding only	13	9.2
Local Govt funding only	2	1.4
Project funding only	10	7.0
<u>More than 50% annual income</u>		
Federal Govt funding only	19	13.4
State Govt funding only	26	18.3
Local Govt funding only	1	0.7
Project funding only	5	3.5
Federal & State combined	11	7.8
Federal-State-Project	3	2.1
Federal & Project combined	3	2.1
Federal-State-Project-Local	2	1.4
State & Project combined	10	7.0
State & Local combined	2	1.4
State-Project-Local combined	1	0.7
No Govt funding/not indicated	19	13.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>100.00</b>

The fragility of this situation was made clear by government threats made to this funding. More than half of these government-funded peaks claimed to have received such threats and 10 were actually totally defunded. Nearly 40% of reasons given for threats or funding loss were due to the peaks political activity and changes in funding guidelines.

**Table 2. Extend of loss of Govt funding (N=142)**

<u>Reason for loss/threatened with loss</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Political activity	27	19.0
Mismanagement	2	1.41
Change in legal statute	2	1.41
Change in funding guideline	27	19.01
Reduction in funding	6	4.22
Change in program funding	5	3.52
Govt takes efficiency dividend	1	0.70
Given short term funding only	3	2.11
Conflict over policy and late contracts	1	0.70
Funding redirected to church-based orgs.	1	0.70
No increase funds for increase in sector	1	0.70
Failure to become involved in new federation	1	0.70
No Govt funding/not indicated	27	19.01
Not applicable	38	26.80
<b>Total</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>100.00</b>

**Relationships with government ministers, bureaucrats and funding departments**

The surveyed peaks relations with government are largely negative, with less than 20% of them claiming to have an amicable relationship, and nearly 8% of them whose relationship had completely broken down. Table 3 provides an overview of how relationships are perceived by peaks.

**Table 3. Current relationship with Govt**

<u>Nature of Relationship</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Amicable	28	19.72
Uncertain/Distrustful	74	52.11
Tense	34	23.94
Completely broken down	11	7.75
<b>N=142 (some of these are multiple responses)</b>		

It appears there is little difference in the extent of this negativity between federally funded and state-funded peaks as demonstrated in Table 4.

**Table 4. Peak relations: Federal vis-a -vis State**

<u>Nature of Relationship</u>	<u>Fed funded</u>		<u>State funded</u>	
Amicable	13	9.2%	13	9.2%
Uncertain/Distrustful	31	21.8%	40	28.2%
Tense	15	10.6%	16	11.3%
Completely broken down	2	1.4%	5	3.5%
<b>N=142 (some of these are multiple responses)</b>				

The results of this, according to the survey findings, are that less than a fifth of the peaks indicate that they are “coping well” and just over a fifth said that they are “managing with little difficulty”. The pressures from government, which have strained relationships and led to difficulties in managing

peak bodies, included total or partial loss of funding, increases in government administration, and government demanding that peaks cease their public advocacy via the media.

The survey indicates contrasting government perceptions of peak bodies. On the one hand, 30% of the peaks said that government perceives them to be “too critical of government policies”, and nearly 18% that they are either “too radical” or simply “rabble rousers”. On the other hand, 55% of them also indicated government thought them to be well administered, and 31% said government considered them efficient. The peaks pointed to numerous impediments that frustrate their day-to-operations. These included bureaucratic interference, changes in government policies, threats to their funding, reduction in funding and inadequate funding, as well as demands made by their members. This often placed the peaks in a dilemma of meeting these demands whilst being hampered by government actions that hinder their fulfilment. Policy issues that the survey indicated were most problematic for peaks were those to do with restraints on advocating through the media and on advocating generally, restrictions to their membership increased departmental control and ministerial directions.

### **National Peaks**

In analysing general social welfare peaks that operate at the national level, the study found that these shared certain unique characteristics that distinguish them from more sector specific national peaks. Because of their obligations in representation across a broad range of communities, these peaks are more likely to have greater confrontation with government arising from advocating on broader issues that affect sector wide issues. Ten peak bodies were identified within this group. Six of them received federal secretariat funding, but only one whose government funding comprised more than half their income. Four of them were dependent on program (project) funding, and three had had part of their funding withdrawn. Four of the peaks indicated they had amicable relations with government, while the other six had fractured relationships. Seven of these peaks were church-based or traditional charity organisations whose relations with government were not necessarily any better than those of the other three. However, the church-based peaks were not as dependent on government funding as the non-church peaks.

Ten national health peaks were identified in the study, and they were better off in terms of funding, with half of them receiving federal funds that comprised more than 50% of their income. However, their relations with government and its agencies were considerably poorer. One claiming to have an amicable relationship and another that said their relationship had completely broken down. Most of these peaks spoke of having particularly fractured relationships with senior departmental staff and with the Minister. Many of the problems seem to arise from government’s sensitive response to issues around HIV, mental health, drug abuse and sexual matters. In more recent times conflicts between the health sector and government policies on privatisation and palliative care appear to have driven the peaks to a deep sense of mistrust of government. However, comments by senior government officers indicate that this mistrust may be due more to misunderstanding (or relationship/funding issues) than to policy differences. The relationships are obviously more complex than this implies. One of the major findings of this study is the large discrepancy in the perceptions held by both parties, of each other.

The interviews revealed a conflation of the perceptions of bureaucrats and ministers as acting in concert with each other. Some people did not clearly distinguish whether they were talking about government officer's and/ministerial policy advisers or workers in minister's offices. Others astutely noted that the word or term "policy" has many meanings. It is just as much about process and not just about content. The mechanics of relationships with government officers and ministers is a *process concern* and *policy* - is the product or program, legislation, specific services, document, etc. They also provided a complex picture of the extent and level of access to ministers and government bureaucrats. There is evidence that a trend was emerging at the federal level that certain groups, eg women, the aged, youth and NESB were being systematically blocked from gaining access to ministers and ministerial advisers. In some instances, they were denied access to relevant government bureaucrats about funding let alone policy concerns.

Ten national aged and disability peaks were also identified, and their relations with government have undergone serious rifts. Only two of them claimed to have an amicable relationship. Issues around the nursing home debate and amalgamation were major impediments to improving relations. One major aged peak was totally defunded, had serious ramifications for the sector. On-going resistance to forming a federation by the eight major disability peaks caused a great deal of disharmony with the Minister and the Department responsible for funding them. On the issue of amalgamating the disability peaks, the government points to a need to have one view, one voice and one policy direction from the disability sector. In contrast, the individual peaks argued that they each have specific needs that can only be met by representation of the independent sectors involved.

Although, on the surface relations between the ten national peaks for women's and children's services and government appears more harmonious than for the aged and disability and health peaks, nevertheless, conflicts over specific issues concerning women or those representing children seemed to be on-going and related to areas that the government failed to fully understand the importance to women and children. Advocating for these issues of importance has only aggravated an already tense situation, and estranged relations have ultimately led to one major women's peak being totally defunded and a peak for children's services being seriously curtailed financially.

Of the other national peaks, (two representing the non-English-speaking background sector, two indigenous peoples peaks, one youth peak, two housing peaks and two specialist consumer peaks), none thought they had an amicable relationship with government. Two had relationships that had completely broken down. Six of them were in receipt of federal funding that comprised more than half their income, but on the other hand, one each of the NESB, indigenous, youth and housing peaks had been completely defunded. In all these sectors, contention has arisen over policies introduced by government with little or no consultation with sector representatives. Of the 48 national peaks surveyed and interviewed and 9 others that agreed to an interview, a bleak picture emerges. Nine (18%) of these peaks were totally defunded and ten (20%) partially defunded, whose loss of funding was due mainly to their political activity and changes in funding guidelines. Only eight (16%) of the peaks had an amicable relationship with government and three (6%) had relations that had completely broken down. Comments from government officers paint a less destructive picture, but one that is obviously fraught with mutual misunderstanding and mistrust.

## **Federal/state by state comparison**

By comparing state/territorial peak relations with their respective Governments with our findings for national peaks relations with the Federal Government, some significant differences were revealed. Of the 37 state-wide peaks in New South Wales (NSW) six (16%) claimed to have an amicable relationship with the State Government, and three (8%) said their relationship had completely broken down. While these findings are not particularly differentiated from the national peaks experiences, the fact that only two (5%) of the NSW peaks had been completely defunded is significant. The interviews with peak executives and departmental officers clearly indicates that problems in relations with government in NSW mainly occur in relationships with the departmental funding bodies and their personnel, rather than with government's political ideology and its social policies. Nevertheless, similar conflicts to the national situation arose over peak advocacy. Some peaks are convinced that the introduction of tendering in some sector areas, as well as threats of defunding and bureaucratic interference, is a means of reducing advocacy that challenges government by choosing more compliant organisations as funding partners.

The situation in Victoria, until a recent change from a Liberal-Coalition to a Labor Government, was even more detrimental to the advocacy function and role of peak bodies than the situation at the national level. In fact, previous governmental relations threatened the very existence of peaks in the state, with many being either totally defunded or seriously curtailed with a severe reduction in funding. Therefore, only two Victorian peaks participated in the survey. Relations with both government itself and its bureaucratic agents severely handicapped the operations of those peaks that did survive "the Kennett years". Tendering was just one means of controlling the surviving peaks. By all accounts, some recovery in relations with the community sector has been achieved with the Bracks Government's reinstatement of disenfranchised peak bodies.

In Queensland, a somewhat similar situation to Victoria existed before a similar recent change in government, but, according to peak executives, this was far less intense and threatening. In fact, only one of the 12 statewide peaks in Queensland said it had been totally defunded by the previous Government. On the other hand, only two (17%) claimed to have an amicable relationship with the present government. Apparently, current peak relations with government continue to be far from satisfactory, with a common complaint that the State Government fails to consult with the sector as it had promised to do.

A much happier situation seems to exist with Tasmanian peak bodies, six of which took part in the survey. There was no recorded defunding of state peaks and two (33%) of the surveyed peaks said they had an amicable relationship with government. Our interviewed subjects indicated that the Tasmanian situation benefits from close, cooperative and collaborative, even personal, relations between peaks and the government bureaucracies responsible for funding them. This kind of harmonious interaction between sector representatives and government is reflected in the ease with which government bureaucrats have access to the peaks' membership, which apparently is not viewed as a threat by the peak bodies.

In South Australia, (SA) a recent change from a Liberal-Coalition to a Labor Government had significant implications for the survival of statewide peak bodies. These range from serious set-backs during the previous government to the present

government's lack of compromise through the introduction of a tendering system and amalgamating peaks under one overriding peak body. The situation is well recorded by the 13 SA peaks that took part in the survey. Five (39%) of the peaks had been totally defunded, mostly due to peaks' political activities and to changes in funding guidelines. Only one peak claimed to have an amicable relationship with government, and one said their relationship had completely broken down. Although most of these figures were acquired during the period of the previous government, there was little optimism for the future in the interviews with peak executives.

Western Australia, (WA) too experienced a recent change from a Liberal-Coalition to a Labor Government, with similar consequences for statewide peak bodies. Thirteen peaks participated in the survey, which was conducted whilst the previous Liberal Government was still in power. The situation in WA does not appear to have been as severe as in SA. Two (15%) peaks were totally defunded, and two had amicable relationships with government; none claimed to have had a relationship that was completely broken down. A major blow to the community sector, though, was the loss of all government funding by the state general welfare peak body. The interviews with both peak executives and government officers, carried out during the present Labor Government's term in office, offer a promise of improved relations, especially with the reinstatement of the general welfare peak.

Changes of government in the Territories have also had an effect on peak body operations, though in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) it was a reverse situation to the states with a Liberal Government replacing a former Labor administration. However, by all accounts, this was an improvement, rather than a decline in relations. The Northern Territory (NT) peaks, on the other hand, underwent a torrid relationship with the previous Liberal-Country Government with one of the five NT peaks totally defunded and two claiming to have relationships that were completely broken down. The NT interview material predicts a far happier future for peaks in the Territory.

Surprisingly, there was not a great deal of difference between the findings for the national peaks in the survey and the state/territorial peaks: 18% of the national peaks had been totally defunded, compared to 14% of the state/territory peaks, but 20% of the latter was due to political activity, compared to 16% of the national peaks; 16% of the national peaks lost funding due to changes in funding guidelines, compared to 15% of the state/territory peaks. In terms of relationships with government, 16% of the national peaks, compared to 17% of the state/territory peaks, said it was amicable, while 6% and 7%, respectively, indicated that the relationship had completely broken down.

In analysing peak roles of representation, peak bodies are often caught in contradictory positions. They must fully perform their duties of representation expected by their membership and broader constituents while having to make compromises to government to avoid losing favour (and losing funding) that would seriously curtail their ability to perform these duties. One way to overcome this problem would be the introduction of legislation that protects the interests of peak bodies. This legislation would include the legal terms-of-reference, a standard definition that outlines the types of duties expected of a peak body, including their role as advocates for the community sector. Analysis of the data revealed problems in peak-government relations that reflect deep misunderstanding and mistrust of each other. This is highlighted in the history of government relations with a national youth peak, which culminated in the defunding of the organisation.

## **Ways forward - climbing over the peaks and through the troughs**

One way to overcome these problems, is to remove funding from specific departments and ministers to a statutory input. This would include legislative guidelines on funding, collaboration, and an overseeing-arbitration committee comprising of all political party-members of the Federal Senate and of community representatives elected by consensus of the community sector. It is argued that state and territorial jurisdictions adopt the federal legislative model.

At a more practical level, a more urgent area of reform is in the public sector itself. We need to replace the new public management ideologies of efficiency and effectiveness with a "public service culture" operating from a premise of the "public good" with non-party partisanship at its core. This would help to maintain the separation of power and influence of public servants from the ministers and governments of the day. Contracts and new forms of public-sector employment practices have steadily eroded core public service values and principles of good governance practice. The rise of executive dominance of policy-making in recent years and the simultaneous devaluing of the policy advice of the public service have damaged the effective working of the public service. An independent public service based on notions of the "public interest" is essential for the Westminster style of liberal democratic government to work effectively. The establishment and maintenance of extra-parliamentary institutions and processes, such as government consultative councils plays an important part in protecting the rights of disadvantaged citizens in the policy-making process.

Some people proposed alternatives to the existing mode of operation adopted by peak bodies, especially in their resources for financial viability. The non-adversarial stance in the relationship between Tasmanian peaks and the State Government was offered as one solution. Seeking non-governmental funding was another suggestion. We focused on one model introduced by a major national charity as a new mode of operation. This hinged on adopting a social enterprise outlook and employing commercial practices through an ideology of integrating social-economic thinking as the key to survival and forming social entrepreneurial organisations to replace the "old style" charity-based traditional peak organisations. This led to the development of a schematic representation of four models of peak bodies currently operating (see Appendix 1).

## **Conclusion**

In the forthcoming report, we finalise the study with a review of its findings and compare these with an earlier empirical study conducted in 1997-1998 (Melville & Perkins). We conclude that certain attitudes and proposed negative policies towards advocacy bodies had undergone some changes from 1998 to 2002, but inadequate funding remained a common complaint by both national and statewide peak bodies. Advocacy bodies, such as peaks still face significant challenges in this new policy environment and will need to learn new strategies to work effectively in it. A policy environment that is increasingly influenced by global policy directions and less and less by local policy concerns and local activism. However, each historical moment seems to produce a new form of activism, which is responsive to these new demands. There is no reason to suggest that peaks and other advocacy organisations will not be able to develop these in the near future.

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## Appendix 1 - Models of Peak Bodies

### **Model 1: The Old Paradigm** eg. Social advocacy peaks of the 1970s-1980s

#### Main Characteristics:

- >> Recalcitrant and resistant to change
- >> Strong focus on one target group
- >> Sees problems with peaks in terms of relationship with bureaucrats – no sense that all are policy actors, ie. politicians and public servants are conduits of ‘various ideological positions’
- >> High levels of frustration with funding and no strategic thinking
- >> Relationship with funding bodies usually quite tense
- >> Recognise some of the current policy challenges, but stuck in a view of ‘activism’ and ‘activist politics’ based in another era
- >> Definitely feels under ‘siege’
- >> Many do not want to change the status quo or the way they operate
- >> Still resisting competitive tendering and other market type policies.

### **Model 2: The Emerging Peak** A hybrid of existing peaks

#### Main Characteristics:

- >> A more sophisticated analysis of policy and political environment
- >> Frustrated with bureaucrats and government policy, but have an analysis of the ‘ideological’ components of it
- >> Do not think that a change in government will necessarily alter things significantly for peaks
- >> Try to work in a very tense and oppositional environment
- >> Thinking strategically how to deal with opposition and hostility to their target group – some reshaping of their organisation is taking place
- >> Not quite sure where they are headed or how long they will stay afloat, but are quite aware it will be something new

### **Model 3: The Reinvented or Reconstituted Peak**

#### Major Characteristics:

- >> They want recognition for the work they do in the sector
- >> Relationships with government are seen as complex; peaks want a more mature relationship with funders and policy makers
- >> High levels of policy analysis and development (write policy, which is used by government departments)
- >> Recognition of the ideological dimension of current battle of peaks as part of citizens’ rights to a voice in policy and democratic regimes
- >> Trying to develop a more sophisticated approach to dealing with old problems – and hostility of government, funders and other peaks
- >> Some have quite amicable relationships with government and bureaucracy
- >> These peaks incorporate large charities and other individual organisations, which are ‘acting’ as peaks, even though they don’t fit onto a common definition of peaks
- >> Willing to engage with competitive tendering, but recognise that it threatens the advocacy role of peak

### **Model 4: The New Paradigm Peak**

#### Major Characteristics:

- >> Acceptance of, and working with, competitive tendering and current policy environment
- >> Survival is a major priority
- >> Adopting a new ideology about NGO roles: eg. must integrate social/economic thinking and not resist economic considerations shaping policy
- >> Growth in social enterprises
- >> Partnership is key element in operating and planning
- >> Re-energise the sector by mutuality and cooperation
- >> Prepared to reshape to meet modern needs
- >> Incorporates the enterprise model with commercial practices and improved analysis, and build up a capacity for social economy
- >> Innovative and flexible in organisational policy thinking
- >> Some believe strongly in the social entrepreneurial model of welfare