

Public Relations, Democracy and the Environment

*It is a battle of truth
versus lies – and one that
has serious implications
for the future*

by Sarah Benson

This article picks up on matters raised in an earlier article by Will Renfrey, on the accounting firm KPMG and the Consultocracy.

On the 1st October 1999 an article in The Age reported that New Zealand ex-Prime Minister Jenny Shipley had been involved with PR firm Shandwick's covert campaign on behalf of the Timberlands logging company against anti-logging conservation groups.

The article reported on the launch of a book on this scandal, 'Secrets and Lies' (1999), by Australian Bob Burton and New Zealander Nicky Hager. The idea to write such a book came about after Hager had received hundreds of pages of leaked strategy documents, minutes and correspondence from public relations firm Shandwick. They gave a clear picture of the techniques employed by Shandwick (and indeed all PR firms) to 'neutralise' conservation groups on the one hand, and shape public opinion in favour of their client on the other. Shandwick is the fourth largest PR firm in the world.

Recently I attended a forum in Melbourne at which Bob Burton spoke about this issue in relation to the NZ scandal and the PR industry in general. He talked about such tactics as churning out letters to the editor from third parties, cultivating and punishing journalists, creating a community group, infiltrating an environmental group, and running a lobbying campaign for a government agency that was not supposed to lobby.

Burton says the book is a continuation of the investigation begun by US journalist John Stauber, whose book on the public relations industry, 'Toxic Sludge is good for you' (1995) also catalogues a wide range of PR tactics. These include donating large sums of money to right wing think tanks, placing op-ed articles in major newspapers, and winning and dining 'the opposition.'

The PR industry currently employ highly devious and subversive means in its effort to promote the interests of their clients – spreading lies, half-truths and 'factoids' to shape public opinion, from a position of invisibility. As they also number politicians and political parties among their clients, this obviously makes a mockery of democratic process.

Around the world countries with records of severe human rights abuse such as Taiwan, South Korea, Pakistan, South America and Mexico employ top PR firms such as Hill & Knowlton to distance their governments from activities that give them a poor image in other countries. Kuwait, Indonesia, Israel, China, Egypt and Peru are also listed as employing Washington-based PR firms by John Stauber in his book 'Toxic Sludge is good for you'.

Another major PR firm, Burson-Marsteller, have campaigned internationally on behalf of telecommunications companies to counter emerging research on the health hazards of microwave radiation from mobile phone infrastructure. This is identical to the tobacco industry's campaign to silence its critics.

The world's media, according to Stauber, have also become "frighteningly dependent on public relations people. Outsiders – the reading and viewing public – would have a hard time discovering this on their own because the dependence on PR is part of behind the scenes press functioning..." Added to this is the fact that between multinational companies and government worldwide there is what Stauber calls the 'revolving door' syndrome whereby employees from industries like biotechnology take positions in government bodies, and vice versa.

This is common in Australia and all first world countries. Which leaves us with serious questions regarding the efficacy of our current system of government. For economic and commercial interests to be tangled up in social policy creation is to invite catastrophe for the future.

We live at a critical time - one where environmental, social and political decisions will have an enormous and

lasting impact on the future. The PR industry therefore is clearly one that needs to be regulated and encouraged to confine its activities to campaigns that work genuinely for the public good – ie communicating information about the dangers of bushfires, water restrictions etc.

At the present time, though, it is a battle of truth versus lies – and one that has serious implications for the future. It is important to put it into this context: unless we can see the whole picture we will be handing this industry unlimited power to skew public processes and information away from what is constructive and helpful.

Burton commented that the task of calling this industry to account has not been easy until recently; it has been a simple matter to dismiss criticism as merely 'conspiracy theory'. The Shandwick documents have put an end to destructive PR as myth and it is now time to call these firms to account.

Mr Burton is currently editor of Mining Monitor – a magazine put out by the Mineral Policy Institute on the mining industry in Australasia. This is a Sydney-based non government Organisation. He has written extensively on the PR industry.

Sarah Benson

is a member of the party and also works in the office of Senator Allison

Magazine Review: DISSENT

Kenneth Davidson's new journal "has been established to encourage and promote vigorous and informed discussion on public affairs".

The first issue contains high quality essays covering foreign policy with respect to Indonesia, our defence strategic environment, the World Trade Organisation, the failure of Friedmanist economics, the demise of Kennett, and the sorry state of Universities.

Another essay details the Destruction of Victoria, and the Challenge of Reconstruction, by the head of the appointed inquiry into all the Kennett government's contracts and their value to the State.

Our copy came from the local newsagent for \$7, but friends report that availability in December was patchy. I would suggest that a year's subscription for three copies is the best way to get it, on phone 02 6260 4213.

Alister Sholl