

Tasmanian premier unsure why Integrity Commission scrapped reform of oversight of state's political lobbyists



By Adam Holmes

Activism and Lobbying

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Weeks out from a new system to register lobbying in Tasmania, it has been scrapped — with no explanation. (ABC News/Pixabay)

In short:

Tasmania has 70 registered lobbyists — firms that act on behalf of paying clients to try to get legislative, policy, grant, and funding outcomes from the government and MPs.

From July 1, a new system was to start giving the public more information about lobbyists' activities with government MPs, advisers and heads of agencies — but now it won't go ahead, without a reason given.

What's next?

Premier Jeremy Rockliff said it was a matter for the Integrity Commission — which has oversight of the lobbyist system — to outline its reasons.

Tasmanian Premier Jeremy Rockliff has said it is up to the state's Integrity Commission to explain why it has decided not to implement a new oversight model

for lobbyists.

The commissioner emailed those affected by the model on Monday to say it would not be going ahead with the new system "at this time", but has not provided a reason.

The model has been in development since 2022 and was due to start on July 1, requiring all MPs, heads of government agencies, and political advisers to disclose contact with lobbyists within five days.

It would then be publicly disclosed, including whether the lobbyist was attempting to influence legislation, government grants or contracts, funding allocations, and government policies.

A lobbyist is someone who either receives a fee to lobby on behalf of a client or is directly employed as a lobbyist by a company.

Tasmania has 70 registered lobbyists, including former premiers Paul Lennon and Will Hodgman, Mr Hodgman's former chief of staff Brad Stansfield, Mr Rockliff's former chief of staff Vanessa Field, and former federal MP Christopher Pyne.

Mr Rockliff said he was unaware why the new model was not proceeding.

"I haven't spoken to the Integrity Commission," he said. "It's up to them to outline their reasons.

"I'm very mindful that the Integrity Commission needs to be a body that's arm's length, if you like, from government and indeed members of parliament."

The Integrity Commission would not comment on why it made the decision, other than to say the decision was made by its board.

PR firm says it was unfairly targeted

The new lobbyist oversight system had gone through multiple rounds of consultation and drafts before a final recommendation was reached.

In one proposed model, the Integrity Commission described the system as a "significant transparency measure" that would "enhance confidence in government decision making".

It would have introduced a 12-month 'cooling off' period before MPs and political advisers could transition into lobbying activities.

Success fees would have been banned, with Tasmania the only state or territory that still allows lobbyists to be paid for getting specific outcomes for clients.

A proposal that prevented lobbyists who advise in election campaigns to go straight back into lobbying was dropped from the final recommendation.

This proposal had attracted extensive criticism from Liberal-linked firm Font PR, which argued it had been "unfairly targeted".

Labor leader Dean Winter said he suspected the state election was a reason for the system not being implemented.

He said Tasmania needed stronger integrity oversight.

"I think we have got to bring confidence back and integrity back to politics," Mr Winter said.



Nelson independent MLC Meg Webb said the model needed enforcement powers to be effective. (ABC News: Maren Preuss)

Nelson independent MLC Meg Webb said the model would have lacked enforcement powers, and should be legislated.

"We need to legislate this new oversight regime so that it's not able to come and go at the whim of somebody," she said.

"There also needs to be a head of power for enforcing it.

"Because without that, under what authority does the Integrity Commission manage compliance and enforcement?"

'Most under-funded integrity body' in Australia

The policy settings around the Integrity Commission have been a regular source of debate in Tasmania.

The government has implemented six out of 55 recommendations from a 2016 review.

This review was itself reviewed by the Justice Department in 2022, but no further recommendations have made headway.

These recommendations included adding a definition of "serious misconduct", that the Integrity Commission maintain jurisdiction over matters referred to other public authorities, and removing the privilege of self-incrimination.



Chief Commissioner Greg Melick. (*Integrity Commission Tasmania: Jon Jarvela*)

The government agreed to carry out an independent review of the Integrity Commission as part of its supply and confidence deal with the Jacqui Lambie Network, but this was cancelled in February, which the government said was due to it interfering with a parliamentary committee.

That review had been used as a reason not to carry out reforms to the Integrity Commission.

The length of time for the Integrity Commission to carry out investigations has also been criticised, with at least one government MP being investigated for more than three years.

In the Integrity Commission's latest annual report, Chief Commissioner Greg Melick said it was "the most under-funded integrity body in the country".

"Regrettably, our investigations are protracted as our staff are forced to juggle multiple competing priorities," he wrote.

"We are not deaf to the growing public sentiment that the commission is not fit-for-purpose."

The most recent state budget included \$3.7 million in operational funding for the Integrity Commission, a near identical amount of funding provided in each of the past two budgets.

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