



TRANSCRIPT

EMPLOYER GROUPS DIVIDED OVER IR AD BLITZ

ACCI Chief Executive Peter Hendy on ABC Radio's The World Today Program - WR Ad Campaign - 8 August 2007.

Reporter: Alexandra Kirk

ELEANOR HALL: Big business launched its multi-million dollar campaign backing the Federal Government's industrial relations laws this morning. But the move into politically sensitive territory has split the employer community. The coalition of business groups behind the campaign insists it's not politically partisan and will focus on the importance of not reversing 20 years of labour market reform.

Some in the business community, though, have decided to distance themselves from the advertisements, citing concerns that they could be seen to be taking sides politically in the lead-up to the election.

In Canberra, Alexandra Kirk reports.

ALEXANDRA KIRK: The anti WorkChoices campaign waged by the union movement and the Labor Party has frustrated business and the Government. They maintain voter nervousness or dislike of the Coalition's industrial relations laws has been fuelled by a \$100-million scare campaign.

Earlier this year the Prime Minister strongly urged business to actively fight for the Government's workplace laws, with some ministers angry that business hadn't done its bit to defend the changes. At first, Mr Howard's call was rebuffed, but some business lobby groups changed their minds, culminating in today's pre-election advertising blitz launch.

Those backing the pro-WorkChoices ad campaign include the Business Council of Australia, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Minerals Council and some State business chambers. But the Australian Industry Group has from the very start dealt itself out, arguing it would be seen as partisan. The National Farmers Federation is out too, and the Master Builders Association, which had been part of the planning, is now on the outer, though it's thinking about running its own campaign.

PETER HENDY: Obviously the unions have been our running an ad campaign, the Government's running an ad campaign and we think this is the information campaign that the Australian business community had to have.

ALEXANDRA KIRK: Peter Hendy heads the Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

PETER HENDY: There is a lot of misleading information coming out of the union campaign. We're particularly unhappy about all that misleading information and the various business bodies that are involved in this campaign, some 19, a large number of business bodies have banded together because they want to correct the record.

ALEXANDRA KIRK: Are you disappointed that some key and influential business groups, for example the Australian Industry Group, the National Farmers Federation and the Master Builders Association have decided not to take part?

PETER HENDY: Well, some of them weren't asked to participate in our campaign and we're very pleased with the unprecedented number of organisations that have actually joined our campaign. I think it would be hard to find if you go back in the history of public policy in Australia to find such an amalgam of business organisations presenting as one

voice at a key public policy issue.

ALEXANDRA KIRK: Is that reflective the trouble the Government is in when it comes to voter support?

PETER HENDY: No, this is about - what we're interested in from the business community is the issues, the policy issues, about workplace relations. It's not about politics.

This is just a much to talk to the Labor Party as it is to talk to the Liberal Party. We're putting a view that we do not want to see any further roll back of industrial relations reform that we've had in this country over the last 13 or 14 years because it would be very, very damaging to the economy.

ALEXANDRA KIRK: Now the unions are supposedly spending like \$100-million on their industrial relations campaign. How big will the business campaign be?

PETER HENDY: Well, not as big as the union movement's dollar figure - I'm not quite sure it's \$100-million - but not as big as their figure, but let me say, we have got significant financial support for this campaign. Very adequate levels of funding.

ALEXANDRA KIRK: How long will it run for?

PETER HENDY: We expect that the campaign will run for a number of weeks and we'll see how it goes in the community.

ALEXANDRA KIRK: Have you made a conscious decision not to continue the campaign once the election is called?

PETER HENDY: We wouldn't be planning to run ads during a federal election campaign.

ALEXANDRA KIRK: Mitch Hooke of the Minerals Council's is shy too about revealing the size of the business lobby's coffers.

MITCH HOOKE: It's not the money, it's the issues, and it's the messages and it's the focus on the two decades of reform, it's the focus on choice and flexibility in the workplace. My experience in public policy and public life is that it's the veracity of the message, it's the integrity of the message, it's the believability of the message. It's not how big your wallet it because if your message is crap, it doesn't matter how many times you run it.

ALEXANDRA KIRK: Wilhelm Harnisch from the Master Builders explains why his organisation withdrew.

WILHELM HARNISCH: Master Builders decision not to be part of the broader business campaign was based on the fact that it wanted to focus on the building specific legislation dealing with workplace relation reform and the industry watchdog, the ABCC (Australian Building and Construction Commissioner), it wanted to make sure that its message relating to these reforms and the benefits to the community was kept separate from the broader business campaign.

ALEXANDRA KIRK: Why was there a need to keep it separate, though?

WILHELM HARNISCH: Our members were keen to make sure that our members weren't or our views weren't diluted in the broader campaign.

ELEANOR HALL: Wilhelm Harnisch from the Master Builders Association ending that report from Alexandra Kirk.