

● Liberal Party kingmaker and former New South Wales minister Michael Yabsley admits he raised some eyebrows when he invited former Keating government treasurer John Dawkins to join his lobbying firm Government Relations Australia eight years ago.

"People would say, 'What the hell are you doing, you're in bed with the enemy'. It was something that happened quite frequently to John, and it happened quite frequently to me," Yabsley says. "But the more considered view was that it was a savvy thing to do commercially."

The relationship has been a success on every level. "Politics can be very adversarial, so asking Dawks to join me was a journey into the unknown, but we've had not so much as a lovers' tiff in all that time," he says.

That's saying something. Yabsley and Dawkins played their politics hard and gave their political enemies no quarter. Elected to the NSW parliament in 1984 – with Labor warrior Neville Wran in power – Yabsley is candid about his time in the bear pit. "I didn't have much to do with the other side. It was a very adversarial time: the Wran government was very tribal and we were very tribal. It was not a convivial atmosphere."

Because politics is so combative, relationships between former foes can confound observers – causing bemusement, bewilderment and, inevitably, cynicism.

Australians are still confused by the friendship between former prime ministers and rivals Malcolm Fraser and Gough Whitlam. Despite the political stand-off that culminated in the vice-regal sacking of the Whitlam government in 1975, both men have enjoyed a warm relationship since and are often seen in public supporting the same causes. Quizzed by a journalist about this unexpected relationship, Fraser once explained: "I enjoy Gough's company."

Fraser and Whitlam continue to attract criticism from their respective parties for consorting with the enemy.

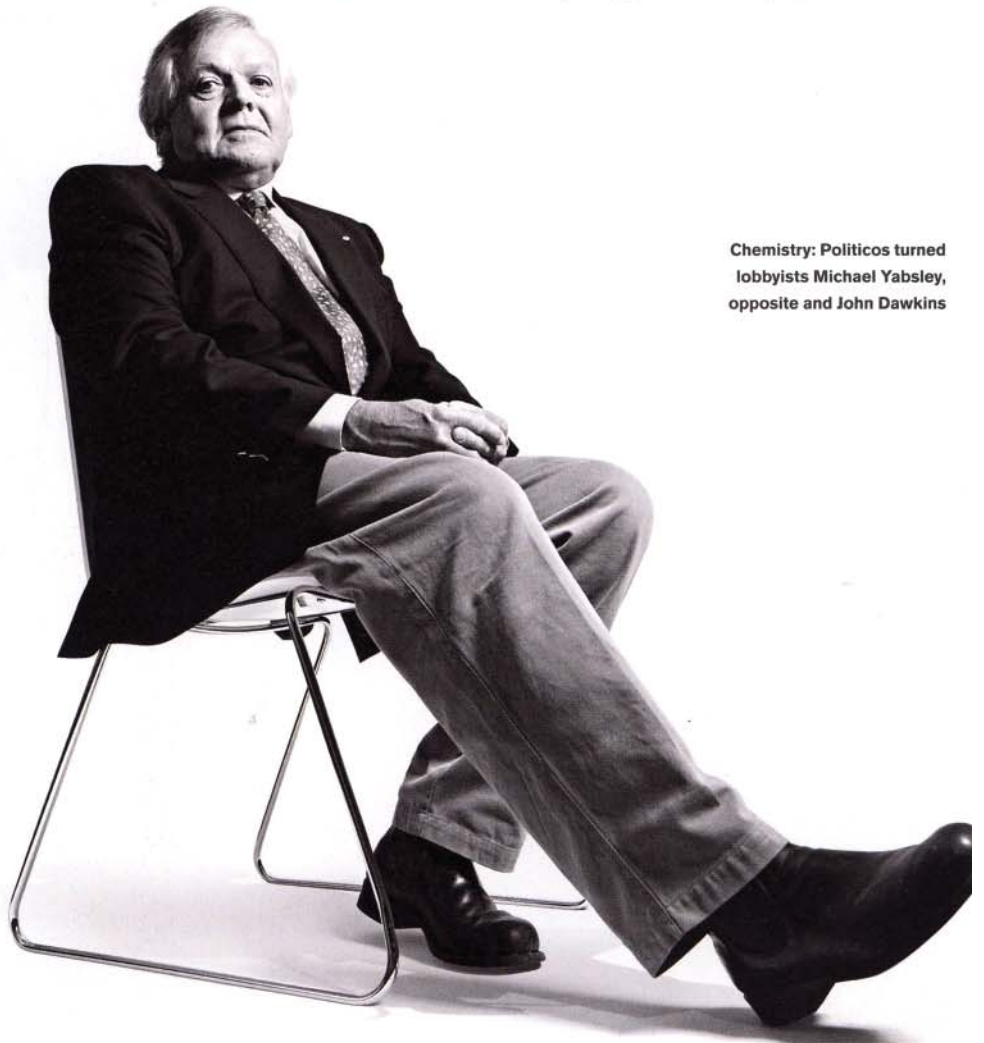
Melbourne Business School organisational psychologist Carol Gill says many people find it difficult to accept relationships that fall outside strict conventional confines. "We associate people with their roles and tend not to see that people play multiple roles [in life]," Gill says. "People's behaviour is influenced a lot by context, so depending on the point at which two people come together, if it's in another context, it's logical that they will be playing different roles."

As a minister in the Greiner government in NSW between 1988 and 1992 – Yabsley held the portfolios of corrective services, state development and tourism – he never crossed paths with Dawkins, who served as a senior minister in the Hawke and Keating governments from 1983 to 1994, finally as treasurer.

It was Victorian Liberal powerbroker and Yabsley intimate, merchant banker Michael Kroger, who suggested Dawkins as a potential business partner. The decision to recruit Dawkins

WHETHER IN POLITICS
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Chemistry: Politicos turned lobbyists Michael Yabsley, opposite and John Dawkins

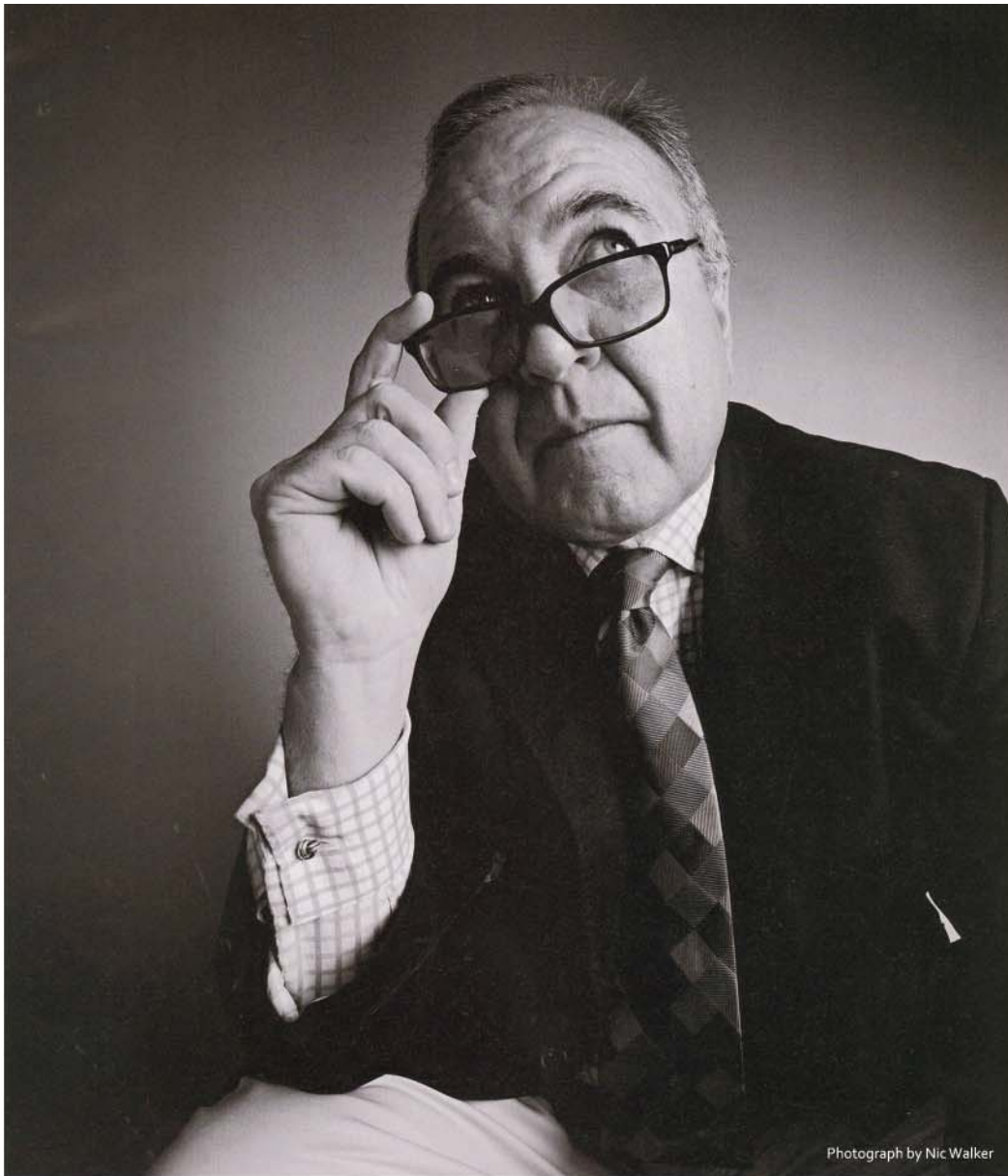
was an instrumental step towards restructuring GRA into a national government relations firm with strong bipartisan credentials. By this time, Yabsley had already sold 62 per cent of his business to the Clemenger Group but he remained the linchpin of the firm.

"Through what turned out to be a lengthy but successful negotiation, we consummated the deal," Yabsley says. "John wanted to be sure that the firm was going to be truly bipartisan – he didn't want to feel that he was stepping in as the token Labor Party presence."

Dawkins established GRA's Adelaide office in 2000 as a shareholder and director of the firm.

The partnership has worked like a song. GRA is one of the biggest lobbyists in Australia, with clients including BlueScope Steel, OneSteel and supermarket chain Aldi.

"As for the kinds of acrimony that creeps into politics, there hasn't been any. One reason is that there's nothing like commercial success to keep everyone happy, but also the chemistry has been right. We are good mates – we can get through a whole night at the dinner table without politics rearing its ugly head," Yabsley says.



Photograph by Nic Walker

They can, but usually they prefer not to. "We talk politics all the time – that's our main shared interest," Yabsley says. "Our stock in trade is politics."

As chairman of the Wentworth Forum, a fund-raising group for federal Opposition Leader Malcolm Turnbull, Yabsley has played an instrumental role in Turnbull's rapid progress from aspiring MP to aspiring prime minister.

"We have common interests besides politics – we both have daughters who are very keen horse riders, we have a passion for the fine things in life and we share the same set of values."

Dawkins was already carving out a successful career as a company director – an interest he retains – when Yabsley raised the prospect of joining the nascent lobbying firm. Although attracted to the prospect, Dawkins says that in the end his decision boiled down to "chemistry".

"I think if we'd found that we didn't like each other, we wouldn't have done it," Dawkins says. "Michael is very intelligent and has a very good

understanding of public policy issues. He's a very affable, easy-to-get-along-with kind of guy – probably easier than me."

Unlike Yabsley, Dawkins is no longer active in organisational politics, although he remains a member of the ALP. But do the two former ministers really never let their political affiliations boil over? "I guess the most difficult time is the month before an election," Dawkins says. "Certainly, there are issues like voluntary student unionism and WorkChoices that we don't talk about because we know we have very strong and very different views."

The director of Melbourne consultancy Media & Political Counsel and founder of agitate.com.au, Ian Hanke, has also raised the odd eyebrow as an aggressive political apparatchik during the Howard years. He was media and political adviser to workplace relations minister Peter Reith during the bitter waterfront dispute and later to Kevin Andrews in the same portfolio. "It was a roving brief, looking for opportunities for the government," he says.

Unlike most political advisers who operate in anonymity, Hanke often found himself in the news. During Mark Latham's term as opposition leader, Hanke was forced to fend off accusations of running a "dirt unit" for the Howard government.

So it comes as a surprise that Hanke is good friends with Michael Richards, chief executive of the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists and, more pertinently, chief of staff to Latham when he was the opposition leader and to predecessor Simon Crean.

"Ian and I were a bit wary of each other at this time [2004], and rarely spoke except through chance encounters," Richards says. "He was being demonised in the media – probably prompted by my side – as running the Coalition's dirt unit, so we kept our distance ... He was seen as the devil incarnate by the Labor side, but I knew that his behaviour was calculated to get under people's skin. To him it was just political theatre."

During their time in Canberra, Hanke and Richards made do with a nodding acquaintance.