

Canberra insiders lobby for business

Australian Financial Review, 9 Mar 2013, Gemma Daley



‘Work found us and it’s been a good year’ . . . ECG Advisory Solution’s Peter Costello, David Gazard and Jonathan Epstein. **Photo: Jesse Marlow**

Gemma Daley

Canberra can seem like a big country town where, if you stay long enough, you become familiar with people closest to power. Some who move on carry this familiarity with them.

Adelaide-born policy adviser David Gazard, whose varied past includes training as a certified snake wrangler, crime reporter, financial journalist, and a senior adviser to then treasurer Peter Costello, recently hired his former boss to head the financial arm of political consultancy ECG Advisory Solutions.

ECG has been in the news for trying to establish an office in Queensland while Costello was conducting the commission of audit for the Newman government, which gave its report in February. It abandoned the office after nine months to concentrate on businesses in Canberra and Sydney.

Mr Costello, who handed in his 1000-page report last week recommending asset sales, has been referred to the state’s Crime and Misconduct Commission over claims of an alleged conflict of interest in his business interests.

The CMC confirmed a complaint had been received, but it was yet to decide whether to launch a formal investigation.

Joining a business run by a former employee is an interesting post-politics career choice for Costello, Australia's longest-serving treasurer.

"I've seen it work the other way," Costello tells the *Weekend Financial Review*, saying he would be largely responsible for courting foreign investment. As treasurer his job required him to decide whether to approve or reject foreign takeovers, according to the national interest.

But he sees no problem with being at the other end of the process, potentially bringing proposals to the government. "You have to operate as a financial business and be licensed as a financial business to advise in these areas," Costello says.

"That's what I've been doing. Under my last boutique hat, I'm taking that experience and bringing it under the ECG rubric."

Gazard worked for Costello from 2004 to 2007. When Gazard left in 2007, Campbell Newman was the most senior Liberal in the country as mayor of Brisbane.

"It was time to take stock," Gazard tells the *Weekend AFR*.

He failed in a tilt at the litmus federal seat of Eden-Monaro in 2010 but life then crystalised into deciding how to capitalise on what and whom he knew.

Setting up a political consultancy has been a wise move. His client base now includes Coles, Westpac, Peabody and Wesfarmers. Companies are looking for new ways to package proposals, attract investors, determine the regulatory and tax hoops and open doors in state and federal governments.

Gazard, whose snake-wrangling course (after he was confronted by a brown on his 16-hectare property south of Canberra) looks appropriate post-politics, reports growing demand, partly in anticipation of a change of government.

"Work found us and it's been a good year," he says, adding the company may expand beyond its offices in Collins Street, Melbourne, and the heart of Canberra. "Companies are looking for a different skill set."

ECG stands for the three directors – another former adviser in the Howard government, economist Jonathan Epstein, as well as Costello and Gazard. "I was self-employed," Costello says of his time as a lawyer before entering Parliament in 1990. "This is going back to my roots of being self-employed, owning a business. I would actually recommend it for a lot of MPs."