

# Small business owner dedicated to the cause

Mark Fenton-Jones

The former chairwoman of the Small Business Council has started a new organisation to represent only small- to medium-size owner operators.

Lawyer Kim Mei-Li Dennis launched SME Boardroom in Sydney last week, attended by about 50 SME owners and shadow treasurer Joe Hockey.

Ms Mei-Li Dennis said that she had been thinking for some time about establishing an organisation just for SMEs but only decided to make it a reality after the last federal budget.

"No one is really representing them [small businesses]," she said. "I thought, 'Small business has been neglected again'."

While acknowledging government initiatives such as the temporary investment tax allowance, Ms Mei-Li Dennis said there "really wasn't much in it for small business".

"There are so many other things that do need to be addressed for small business and the problem is that nobody from small business seems to have time to address them," she said.

Asked how the new organisation would differ from others that represent small businesses, such as state chambers of commerce and the Council of Small Business of Australia, Ms Mei-Li Dennis did not single any out for criticism but emphasised that hers would represent only small business.

"This is run by a small business owner," said Ms Mei-Li Dennis, who owns Jungle, a group of SMEs that provide strategic consulting, legal services and business investment for growing businesses.

She said many other organisations have objectives and agendas that do not always represent small business concerns.

"Other organisations are typically employees or people representing other organisations. I feel often those views are not from the horse's mouth but tend to be a little bit skewed based on the objectives of that organisation.



From jungle to boardroom . . . Kim Mei-Li Dennis.

Photo: MICHEL O'SULLIVAN

"In this case there is no other objective other than to really affect change for small businesses."

Initially Ms Mei-Li Dennis will pay to establish the new organisation, which offers free membership to SME owner operators employing between one and 100 staff.

"The main thing we want to do is get owner operators on board. This is not intended to be a commercial venture — it is very much about making a difference for small business."

Each quarter, members will participate in a short, online survey that will be published as a white paper and provided to government, media and business.

At this stage, Ms Mei-Li Dennis has no intention of lobbying government on behalf of small business.

"I hope that we will have such a large number of members that government and bigger businesses have to listen to us."

Asked if she considered the

Rudd government understood small business, Ms Mei-Li Dennis replied, "Not really. There are actually not a lot of people who really understand small business unless they have been in small business themselves."

"Even big business tries but still just doesn't get it."

"I am hoping that through SME Boardroom we can help other people by giving them honest views about what is driving us and bothering us and what they need to give us."

Between 2004 and 2006 Ms Mei-Li Dennis was chairwoman of the federal government's 12-member Small Business Council that Mr Hockey, then small business minister, established to advise the government and bureaucrats on small business concerns.

At Thursday's launch, Mr Hockey told *The Australian Financial Review* he agreed to be the patron of SME Boardroom because "small business is our political heartland".