

WIT

A bitter battle for the lucrative heart of the pest control industry is more than a falling-out over cash for comment, chemicals and termites, reports Hedley Thomas

THEY billed themselves as modern crusaders with a noble cause to save home owners the grief and expense of termite infestation.

Just like the timber-chomping critters, Andrew Campbell, Robbie Merritt and Mark Porter are resourceful, voracious and forceful. Working under the banner of Termite Action Group, they rallied the thousands of Queenslanders, builders and cheating pest controllers.

The media loved the made-for-television character. Merritt, the excitable owner of a Brisbane home severely damaged by termites, and Campbell, a semi-retired, former leather-goods designer and peddler of steel frames for houses, revealed in the national spotlight. Porter, a Brisbane pest controller with sound credentials, provided the technical advice.

The trio engineered a seemingly perfect dynamic: casting themselves as consumer champions talking on the shanks. They were the good guys — standing up for distraught families who had lost their homes to a snogbaggor for termites — against "the system".

Many builders still shudder at the mention of TAG: several major project-home companies in Queensland have been forced to drop spectacular and confrontational tactics in the media glare.

Porter, who lives in a house at Forest Lake on Brisbane's northern shore, sneers as he recalls his early days. "I don't think any of us realised values have plummeted because of an unfair perception of the area as 'Termite City'."

Now, however, the dynamic is vastly different. Amid claims of death threats, stalking and cyber skirmishes, the group's founders are at war with one another.

Merritt, who says he lost his house, job, wife and children because of the termite issue, and his zeal for TAG accuses Campbell of profiteering from the misery of home owners and undermining the group's aims. In a complaint sworn a fortnight ago at the Southport Magistrates Court, Campbell claims Merritt is "a whiterant" in a complaint sworn a fortnight ago at the Southport Magistrates Court, of threatening "myself and my family with violence" and "stalking me".

"My life is like living the script of a B grade movie and my wife is understandably upset and scared," Campbell says.

Merritt, who denies threatening violence, says he makes no apology for "truthfully outing Campbell as a mouth for hire who has sold out to the

chemicals lobby while pretending to be a consumer advocate".

Both men have antagonised key players in the building industry with sensation-seeking stunts and statements. Both purport to be walking dictionaries on termites, building codes and treatments. Both make motherhood statements about acting in the best interests of consumers.

Where they differ, cursorily, is on the usefulness of chemicals against termites. The differences are largely about money — and the vested interests of the chemical and pest control lobby which now quietly funds Campbell's public campaigning.

Since January 1, changes to the Building Code mean builders of new homes no longer need apply for termite-killing chemicals to the slab and surrounding area. Instead of chemicals, builders are installing termite-resistant physical barriers to prevent penetrations. The changes are environmentally friendly, maintenance-free and, arguably, termite-proof.

Overnight, builders have walked away from chemicals. A slice of an industry worth millions of dollars has been lost. Some chemical manufacturers and distributors as well as pest controllers. The changes do not affect existing homes, which require ongoing chemical treatment.

"Put it this way," says Ian Stephen, a former pest controller. "If I were a manufacturer or a retailer of the chemical products used to treat homes, I would be angry. I would have already sold up because I just wouldn't be selling the same volumes any more."

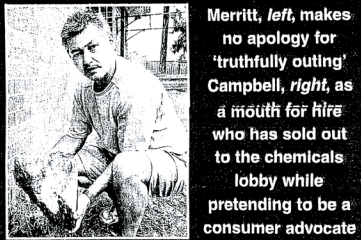
According to Merritt and Porter, the writing was on the wall for chemicals. Despite having sprayed millions of chemicals as a pest controller for two decades, Porter's research led him to the conclusion that chemicals were often ineffective and lured home owners into a false sense of security. He favours physical barriers as a primary and sole deterrent in new homes.

"Once I reached that point, I started to speak publicly about the importance of a working group set up by the government to set the wheels in motion for amendments to the Building Code," he says.

"But Campbell had gone cold on anything that detracted from the chemical industry. He was a man of many views and some doubts about the integrity of his motivations.

"Robbie and I walked away from it at that point. We wouldn't accept funding because it was cash for comment," Porter and Merritt say. Campbell had already made up his mind to support chemicals.

Anyone clicking on the TAG web site (www.termiteactiongroup.com)



Merritt, left, makes no apology for 'truthfully outing' Campbell, right, as a mouth for hire who has sold out to the chemicals lobby while pretending to be a consumer advocate



now run solely by Campbell will get more than an inkling into where he is coming from.

Although he promotes himself as a consumer advocate, his site (which had 997,000 hits last year) has become an emporium to further the commercial ends of pest controllers.

Among thousands of words of conspiracy theories alleging fraud in the Queensland Government's Building Services Authority are a n o t e r o u s advertisements and links to pest controllers.

Home owners who visit the site or contact Campbell for advice are not told that it is paid by Australia's largest pest control company. Amalgamated, or by a leading chemicals supplier, FMC. Campbell has written to a number of companies seeking sponsorships in correspondence obtained by The Courier-Mail. He assures one company that in return for \$24,000 "we would look at immediately installing on our website a strong endorsement of (name deleted) and encourage its usage as a TAG-endorsed product".

Campbell's sponsorship pitch also promises that the company's involvement with TAG could remain a secret, if it wished.

"He is a good hire, not a consumer advocate," says a respected figure in the termite-control industry.

It would be unfair to pour scorn on all of TAG's early work. Clearly, say longtime industry leaders, action was needed to toughen a regulatory framework which allowed bad builders and cheating pest controllers to compromise the integrity of thousands of Queenslanders.

TAG forced the Building Services

Authority to tighten controls and seek compensation for home owners.

But since TAG's splintering, Campbell has embraced the chemical and pest control lobby and joined on a campaign to overturn the changes to the Building Code that harm the chemicals business. "It is a full-time job for me now," smiles Campbell.

"The truth is, I'm one of a few people out there who understands all the facts. A termite-infested home can result in stress, financial loss and the destruction of a major asset, and I get angry that fearless builders, bureaucrats and associations with vested interests couldn't give a damn. I deal with everyone — architects, builders, politicians and pest controllers. I also have a vast number of consumers who come to me for help and who I assist in getting their cases dealt with."

Campbell, who also has a track record of accusing the BSA of serious wrongdoing, said he had lodged two cases with the Criminal Justice Commission on the BSA's absolute fraud. "The CJIC has dismissed one of the complaints and is still looking at a "lack of accountability claim".

When home owners call Campbell for help: "I tell them the first rule is, don't talk to the BSA."

The BSA's acting general manager Ray Potts yesterday demanded that "scurrilous and defamatory material" posted on Campbell's website be removed.

Roland Hovey, a director and general manager of Amalgamated Pest Control which turns over \$24 million a year and sponsors Campbell and TAG, describes his lobbyist as "a real ferret and a man with a mission."

Asked about funding Campbell, Hovey says: "We are a financial member of TAG and pay membership fees and we have an arrangement with Andrew where he provides certain services that we pay for. We have in no way tried to influence Andrew in what he's doing. Hovey said Amalgamated, one of several companies with a presence on TAG's website, so far had paid Campbell less than \$10,000.

Roger Pinder of FMC Australia, which markets a termite-killing chemical product called Bifex, said there was nothing untoward in the undisclosed and "very small" payments made to Campbell.

The Australian Environmental Pest Managers Association's Queensland chairman Grant Currie said: "It's a valid question — where does he get his money? He could be getting funds from all sorts of people. All I do know is that he has some issues which we are in agreement on, but when he talks about conspiracies and goes over the top, I don't want to know about it."

"I look at the big picture: people can now build to a lesser standard than what they had before and chemicals remain the only things that kill termites. And if our needs and Andrew's remain the same, we will walk the line with him."

Campbell says he seeks nothing wrong with accepting undisclosed payments from industry players and rejects suggestions he has created a livelihood while masquerading as a consumer advocate.

"The reality is that I do get some money. But what we draw from sponsors is not enough. We are certainly not compromised because my foremost priority is to the consumer. And at the end of the day, nothing kills termites like chemicals."

The next chapter in the rise and fall of the Termite Action Group will unfold in Southport on Monday when Campbell and Merritt meet over claims and counter-claims about their rise and fall.