

Level Democratic Playing Field—You Must Be Joking

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If the ideal of democracy is supposed to be about government by and for the entire population of a country, then we have real problems in this country.

Quite apart from the democratic distortions of compulsory preferential voting, which deliver many representatives to both houses of parliament contrary to true voter choice, we have a system that delivers all representatives incredible privileges and power through incumbency.

In printing and postal allowances alone, sitting MPs (but not Senators) have at least \$152,000 available in any one year, and there are carryover provisions to enable significant amounts of each entitlement to be moved from year to year allowing for an election-year nest egg. According to the Ministerial and Parliamentary guidelines, 'the communications allowance (up to \$30,800 for the largest electorates) ceases to be available *at the close of business on the day before polling day*'.

How rich is that? Not the day the election is called, but the day *before* you all vote? Pity the poor independent candidate trying to compete against that. Is it any wonder people of exceptional experience with so much to offer, give up in frustration at the ever increasing cost of mounting any sort of non-party-backed campaign?

We are heading towards the second-best democracy money can buy, after the United States, where it takes about \$1 million on average every two years to mount any sort of an election or re-election campaign for Congress. But in Australia the taxpayer is footing an ever-increasing amount of the bill to help re-elect incumbent MPs both at and between elections.

Printing is but one rort. While Senators are subject to tighter control over their printing, Members of the House of Representatives can now print how-to-vote cards and other material promoting party Senators. This neatly sidesteps the Senate Department's insistence that Senators cannot advertise other than their own re-election.

In the House of Reps the situation is even worse. You may remember the political mileage the Coalition made of former Labor MP Bob Horne's use of printing 'entitlements' prior to the 2001 election. Horne spent \$ 219,000 over 12 months in what up to then was a totally uncapped scheme requiring only the signature of a public servant to approve the next newsletter, pamphlet or whatever.

After the 2001 election it was revealed other MPs, with Liberal Barry Haase at the top of the pile, had *each* spent up to \$416,000 per annum on printing. Poor old Bob Horne had suffered the wrath of an outraged electorate and was gone. Haase and those others named were re-elected before all the cats were out of the bag.

By 2002 the \$10 million stationery and postage bill was 13 times more than the average \$5000 spent by MPs a decade ago! The government decided (as it did later after public outrage over MPs' super) that the system was politically untenable, and a cap of \$125,000 was announced on printing 'entitlements'. Having spent about \$10,000 three times a year on a newsletter, I wondered how in hell this amount of money could be justified, unless MPs were putting out a newsletter a month.

It wasn't until a Labor MP alerted me in August this year (2004) that the penny dropped. Both the major parties had 'agreed' that the printing allowance could be used to produce election material. On September 1 all MPs received Circular No 2004/43 from the Manager, Entitlements Branch, Ministerial and Parliamentary Services.

It advised that *'the Special Minister of State (Eric Abetz) has recently approved the inclusion of postal vote applications and other voting information in the categories of printed materials which may be distributed to constituents'*.

Contrary to the convention (not regulation) that the 'entitlements' of office can only be used for a member's own re-election, the approved material now included information *'dealing with the how to vote for the Senate in the state or territory in which the Member's electorate is located'*.

In other words, the taxpayer was now not only paying the incumbent MP's salary, an uncapped phone allowance for office and home, cars and petrol, travel, accommodation (also by staff of Senators not up for re-election), a \$37 million public funding for major parties at an indexed \$1.90 per primary vote. The taxpayer was also footing the bill for the printing and postage of campaign literature that, by any fair judgement, should be paid for from the many millions of dollars donated to party campaign coffers by various means, both legal and nefarious.

Postal vote applications are also now fair game for party political propagandists, a complete distortion of the principle of a secret ballot without coercion. Postal votes, including the distribution of applications, should be controlled completely by the Australian Electoral Commission and should not allow any political advantage.

What do we do about all of this? In the absence of any support from the major parties, I can only suggest the sorts of reforms needed. The first would be a far more modest cap on printing and communications entitlements; indeed, all privileges of office,

including travel allowances. There must also be a line drawn under all entitlements at the moment an election is called, with all expenses paid from party coffers or public funding of primary votes. In addition I'd suggest a

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| <p style="text-align: center;">What to do?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stop parliamentary entitlements the moment an election is called• Cap MP campaign expenditure at \$50,000 |
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cap on the spend in a campaign by any MP of around \$50,000, rather than attempting to track down donations through the myriad of trusts, foundations, dinners, raffles and

other rorts used to channel political largesse. Each candidate would be required to manage and account for every dollar of donation and spending. Such a cap would even the playing field for other serious candidates.

A pipedream? Perhaps. But if the public doesn't take time to understand the current process and agitate like they did around my Private Members' Bill to reform parliamentary superannuation, then it won't happen.

The trouble is, we've just elected a straight-through-to-the-keeper House of Reps and Senate, and there'll be no parliamentary inquiries like the one into my parliamentary super Bill that triggered such a public outcry, and eventually forced the Latham-led reform.

However, keep an eye out for the Coalition (with major party support) to adjust the 'convention' and the regulations so that Senate printing entitlements are brought into line with the House of Reps.

Have I ever told you about the democratic deficit in our election system?