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To
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 The Committee Secretary
 Senate inquiry to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
 Committee Secretariat
 Federal Parliament of Australia

**SUBMISSION ON THE CONDUCT OF THE 2001 FEDERAL ELECTION AND
 MATTERS RELATED THERETO**

Summary: For truly democratic elections, the people must be enabled to cast adequately informed votes for policies and candidates, not just parties. The conduct of the 2001 Federal Election included many features that prevented it from being democratic. Since these features apply to most parliamentary elections, federal and state, changes must be made or elections will continue to be effectively undemocratic.

There is recognised to be a surging 'All-is-not-well' feeling and alienation about how our Parliamentary democracy is working. Yet democracy could work. A summary of some of the current anomalies shows that obvious reforms are possible.

Every criticism below of the conduct of recent elections includes a recommendation for change. Some are innovatory, many inexpensive, and some light-hearted, so that the 'sport' of elections can be constructive, not destructive.

Australia has been among world leaders in improvements to parliamentary democracy, and can respond today to the challenge to still lead and innovate, with its traditional spirit.

Index

1. Informing the Electorate .What are we voting for? We must know.
 - i. Continual public discussion of policies as a matter of public interest.
 - ii. Financial statement by Treasury and public record of the government in power.
 - iii. Revelation of policies by parties and candidates
 - iv Commercial confidentiality must not apply to government dealings,
 - v Three-week election campaigns.
 - vi Notice of an election.
 - vii More information about other parties and candidates
 - viii. Truth in electioneering

2. We must be able to vote for policies, not just parties.
 Electronic technology now makes this feasible.

3. Costs
 - i. Capping expenses, for a more level playing field.
 - ii Reducting xpenses of elections.
 - iii. Waste in elections, as with current How-to-Vote cards
 - iv Costs of by-elections

4. For a more level playing field
 - i The two major political parties can put up two candidates for the same seat, at the same cost
 - ii Preferential voting should not force anyone to vote for a candidate they do not want

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters	
Submission No.	26
Date Received	12/6/02
Secretary	<i>[Signature]</i>

- iii. No push-polling.
- iv. No voting intention surveys once the election campaign begins.
- v Freedom of speech.

3. Role of the media.

- i Political policies and candidates should be treated by the media as news,
- ii. Reduce the push to government by The Leader
- iii. News headlines are not fudged by distractions and minor personality issues
- iv Reversing public cynicism
- v Making the real business in elections a better sport.
- vi. The Electoral Commission and the Internet
- vii. Candidates on the Internet.

4. Concluding Comment

IMPROVING DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS

1. Informing the Electorate .What are we voting for? We must know.

i. Continual public discussion of policies as a matter of public interest. New policies under consideration should be put forward to public debate as well as to internal party discussion. This process should be intensified when an election is felt to be in the offing, even before it is announced. A party policy is not like some statue to be draped in secrecy until the election is announced, or kept from the children until Christmas by Santa Claus, whatever the tactical reasons to keep it private. The media must have something more nourishing for its teeth rather than obsessions with 'When?' or 'Who will win?' or petty faux pas.

ii. Financial statement by Treasury and public record of the government in power. The Treasury must present a financial statement by one week into an election campaign, and the Government present a summary of its legislation, income from selling public assets, the costs of selling off assets, who profited, increases in total foreign debt resulting from government sales (more private debt, which pays a higher interest) and how major funders of its political party have benefited.

A statement of the Commonwealth's economic independence should also be presented, including, eg a map of how much of the country has become foreign owned before and during the government in power.

iii. Revelation of policies by parties and candidates, includes two-page summary form that is given more publicity and leafleting than slogans, plus some degree of 'eventualities' alternatives to give pragmatic latitude if gaining power, and reduce the scope for broken promises 'because the situation has changed'.

iv Commercial confidentiality must not apply to government dealings, especially at elections. Government must be truly open. (Secret clauses in government contracts should not be binding on a new incoming government.)

v Three-week election campaigns. The campaign must last at least three weeks for full discussion of issues and presentation of candidates - not just beat-ups and slogans until all are weary of them.

vi Notice of an election. The timing must never be manipulated to coincide or be affected by foreseeable events of great public interest which can distract voters. To reduce the sitting party's advantage, notice of the election date should be given at least a week before the official campaign opens.

vii. Truth in electioneering. When politicians make promises, they put up a personal bond, to be paid back on losing the election, or for winning candidates, settled according to the situation within 12 months.

2. We must be able to vote on policies. Electronic technology now makes this feasible. The party winning power can then not claim a mandate for everything that it may want to do.

3. Costs

i A more level playing field by capping expenses of candidates and parties. A ceiling on money spent on political campaigns is more important for democratic justice than subsidies paid for votes received. The more money spent, the more it become glitz, PR, and commercial persuasion, and wastes economic resources.

Government subsidies may be merely added to the war-chests funded by business or organisations so that the end result is only more expensive elections. Creative accounting is always impossible to stop completely, but glaring anomalies will glare and can be nailed.

ii Expenses of elections. These are becoming more than this country reasonably should afford. They could be substantially cut by the measures proposed - especially by reduction of costly spin-doctored advertising and the waste of brains and money in intention surveys. The introduction of voting for policies, now technically possible, including by computer, even through interactive television, would be most costly at its introduction, but would prove its value - and indeed, stimulate more voter interest among the presently cynical citizens than any amount of color television spectacle.

Political policies and candidates should be treated by the media as news, of intrinsic public interest to recount, more than sensational private scandals or details of grisly murders. This reduces the need for expensive advertising. The public can learn to insist on this publicity, so the media respond to their demand.

iii. Waste in elections, as with How-to-Vote cards. Sensible solutions are obvious, while still making it possible for voters to 'meet the parties' and have both information and personal contact with candidates' supporters on election day at the booths. (A list is available of recommendation to avoid the current waste - eg postcards with candidate's policies, photos and record could be consulted at the boundaries of polling stations, or returned to the candidates' supporters.)

iv Costs of by-elections. Parliamentarians who stand down during their parliamentary term for any reason other than serious illness or family tragedy immediately lose their benefits and they pay for by-elections incurred. This includes leaders or ministers who lose office under an incoming government. If they take their bat and go home, they have not right to take home swag as well.

4. A more level playing field

i The two major political parties can put up two candidates for the same seat, at the same cost. This much-needed reform can enable voters to decide between policies and positions, gives more chance to new blood, and reduce pre-selection shenanigans.

ii Preferential voting should not force anyone to vote for a candidate they do not want by having to rank all candidates to the end of the list, although they should be notified that if all their listed preferences fail in turn, their vote is lost and they may be letting in a candidate they want even less. But it can do parties great good to realise that their candidates have been elected on less than a majority of votes, even when preferences are included.

The simple block vote that is predetermined by parties not voters should not be the only alternative to complex rankings of long lists.

iii. No push-polling. This is blatantly carried on by two-party-preferred opinion polls, which should be banned as attempts to mislead respondents and the public into thinking that no other choice is possible.

iv. No voting intention surveys once the election campaign begins. The underlying purpose of these is to try to persuade swinging voters where the strength lies. I would fly as a kite, even as an impossible one, that any interviewer on the broadcast or print media who asks anyone who they think will win deserves to be fined \$100 on the spot - which might make huge amounts of money, space and time available for important issues - and also increase excitement as the outcomes would be even more unpredictable. Instead, have surveys about public opinion on particular policy issues - each survey's content and information being approved by representatives of both major parties and an independent media, so that it did not distort issues by leading or misleading questions.

v Freedom of speech. This is being progressively reduced, with limits, permits and charges for permits. During elections campaigns, anyone should have the right to stand in public places offering campaign material and discussion, provided they do not obstruct, create noise, or actively approach people. Melbourne should have well publicised places like Yarra Bank in every locality, where soap-boxing and poster-sticking is free. A good tourist and leisure attraction.

Organisations for civil liberties should collate and report all incidents where people who make public statements (e.g. in letters to newspapers) are intimidated with threats of legal action, when they have been critical, but not outrageously scurrilous or libellous. All media should be free to criticise without fear. There is a need for public servants to carry out the orders of the government without fuss and public criticism, but those orders of the government must be publicly known, and public servants should be allowed to whistle-blow when the public interest is clearly being harmed and 'confidentiality' is being abused.

vi. More information about ALL parties and candidates is essential.

- **THE PARTY IN POWER** must not put any advertising material for its party on a government-funded website, even under the guise of 'press-releases'. Facts are what matter. For 3 weeks before an election, 'government' letterhead, funding and helicopters cannot be used in campaigns.

vii. • **NO POLITICAL ADVERTISING ON TV** saves an enormous amount of campaign money and debt of gratitude to big funders. See The role of the media for alternatives on television.

3. Role of the media - which includes recommendations made in other sections.

i Political policies and candidates should be treated by the media as **NEWS**, like Sport.

VOTERS ARE INFORMED on all the important issues likely to face the government, all the candidates and their chief policies, what costs will be, and who pays for them. **THIS IS NEWS-**

WORTHY BEYOND MOST 'NEWS'. It should take up as much time as the sports news, and not be a cost on the political parties.

Elections and government could rival Olympic games in fascinated interest for all citizens.

There are **DEBATES** on all major issues by the major parties with minor parties also getting a chance. There are rights of reply for anyone who is personally criticised, or for a party that feels that it has been misrepresented.

There can be documentary reports presented on the State of the Nation and the Land, in which different political opinions can have their say.

ii. Reduce the push to government by The Leader. This is a bad trend, and is largely the responsibility of the media. The public needs to know much more about other candidates, especially Ministers and Shadow Ministers

iii. News headlines are not fudged by distractions and minor personality issues

iv Reversing public cynicism. Public cynicism is deliberately fostered to encourage apathy. Elections are boring, Kennett urges persuasively. Active citizenship can be encouraged, as a leisure activity with all the excitement of computer games, and all the luck of gambling, the adrenalin of sport, and the thrill of joining in.

The media could keep a running record of promises like a batting list. Post-election this promise list is periodically reviewed.

The media might also present election information under two headings: -

TRIVIAL pursuits include all leader personality cults, gossip and funny events.

SERIOUS pursuits are about policies, past records, future problems, and relevant information about all candidates' qualification and previous record.

• **PARLIAMENTARY RECORDS OF OTHER PARTIES AND INDEPENDENTS** are also published. Print media will set this out in a consistent place and layout so that voters can collect and refer back to it when preparing to vote.

• **THE MEDIA DEFINES TERMS** such as 'growth', and asks candidates also about their buzzwords.

• **LIES** do not lie down however much they are nailed down, so the media should surely have a responsibility to set out the facts when lies are published.

v Making the real business in elections more fun. Run as recommended, Australian elections could become a popular international tourist attraction, and a highlight of people's lives, regarded like an Olympic event. We do not need American style balloons, razzmatazz, circuses and waste. Australians have never been stuffy in the past. World innovations in governance are feasible now.

• POST-ELECTION: -

SCORE EVERY ELECTION OUT OF 10 FOR HOW CLOSE IT COMES TO BEING A DEMOCRATIC ELECTION AS DESCRIBED

4. The Internet

i. The Electoral Commission. **THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION WEB PAGE** has full information, plus links to all parties and independents and their policies., summary pages on

issues for comparisons, and an ongoing debates page specifically for all claims, counterclaims, and a page for corrections of misinformation in the media, regardless of its source.

ii. Other internet involvement. **ALL POLITICAL CANDIDATES' WEB PAGES ARE LISTED IN THE PAPERS AND ON TV.** If they are barmy - all the more debate is needed and possible.

5. Concluding Comment

All these recommendations are feasible. More is needed to promote democracy at every government level, but it would be good to have open public debate about the innovations in these recommendations, and to look at even unexpected ideas seriously, as well as applying the obvious solutions to current defects.

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