

**To the Committee Secretary**

**Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters- Election Funding and Disclosure Reform Bill**

**Name of Organisation: Quaker Service Australia (QSA), 119 Devonshire St Surry Hills NSW 2010**

- **My perspective:** I have been donating regularly to QSA since 1984
- I served on the Board from 1991-1994 and was its Public Officer during that period.
- I am on a Queensland Sub-Committee for QSA whose job it is to work to raise funds which are sent to the central committee in Sydney.
- Whilst overseas, I have visited some QSA projects and can verify they are alleviating poverty and contributing to development of communities in resilience, environmental concerns, and positive health outcomes.

**My argument:** Whilst I have sympathy with legislation to curb foreign influence in our political systems and processes, I am concerned with the proposed linking of this to the charitable sector.

The government's new foreign donations legislation is a direct threat to democracy that will silence those organisations without the money to pay for lobby groups. As a long time donor to QSA, I object to my money and for staff time to be consumed in lobbying.

It has been suggested that the effect of these proposed restrictions would mean that rather than separating out donations, and ensuring they comply, most charities would simply cease advocating publicly on the issues that matter to them. We would cease to hear about issues of injustice, which would be a tremendous loss to Australian society. The Charity Sector through collective sharing of information has provided valuable advice to DFAT, Indigenous Affairs, Immigration and other agencies.

Charities should be free to advocate on behalf of people who are powerless or vulnerable. We need a regulatory environment that respects and encourages charities' participation in public policy as the free exchange of opinions, information and ideas is vital in an open democratic society.

QSA's voice will be silenced as we cannot afford to, or might not choose to pay for advocacy. The irony is that the legislation generally only applies to public activities. One perverse outcome if the legislation is passed in its current form, may be that it drives advocacy out of the public realm.

I consider that the requirements are complex, cumbersome, broad and vague. One requirement, for example, would require senior staff and board members of charitable organisations to disclose if they are members of political parties. If organisations like QSA are found to be in breach of this legislation, the threat of big fines or potential jail time will hang over our heads. In a democracy this legislation is ridiculous.

**Conclusion:** There already exists sufficient legislation under the States' Charities Acts to prevent the disquiet being exhibited by the Government in muffling their voices. Charities are already well regulated and prohibited from supporting political parties and candidates. They can only advocate for their charitable purpose, which must be for public benefit. The legislation could be challenged as a restriction on freedom of political communication. It would discourage and suppress public comment. Given the lack of justification offered for the legislation applying to charities, there are serious risks that the legislation would be invalid if it was passed in its current form. In other words, it promises to be a huge time waster to a Government which has many really important areas to address at present.

Thank you for your consideration of my concerns.

Yours faithfully

Valerie Joy

Member of QSA/QRM Committee and regular donor to QSA.