

The ALP frequently publicises large financial donations by 'Big Business' to the Liberal and National parties. Those latter parties respond by documenting the large payments from the Union Movement to the ALP, and by pointing out that Big Business also gives large amounts to the ALP. Oddly, it is rarely mentioned that the biggest donor by far is ... me. And you. And all the other taxpayers.

Public funding of federal election campaigns first occurred in 1984. It seems the official justification was that it would reduce the need for donations by wealthy organisations (Businesses and Unions) to political parties. The implication was that the money could influence Governments to provide legislation that met the needs of the donors. Nobody could actually remember an example of where this distortion of the Parliamentary process had happened, but apparently we needed to ensure it did not happen in the future. So it was that our Parliamentarians voted to protect their integrity and honour – by sharing out \$8.5 million of our taxes amongst their parties.

This generosity on our part has been used by Party Campaign teams to ensure that the democratic process can work effectively. For example, it pays for those 'interesting' TV and newspaper adverts during the campaigns. And for essential items such as the colourful plastic wrapping that so amusingly adorns polling booths on Election Day. And where would we be without the informative leaflets that appear in post boxes? Democracy does not cheap.

Cheap it is certainly not. Taxpayers 'donated' \$38.6 million towards the cost of the last Federal election. But this surely means that donations by wealthy organisations have been reduced? Er, no. Their philanthropy and earnest patronage of democracy has not wilted. This might have something to do with the fact that the cost of donations is included in the prices of products, services, or union membership fees.

Hence, the real donor is ... the Australian taxpayer. Me and you, again.

Clearly Australian political parties are addicted to public and private funding of election campaigns, in the same way that State Governments are dependent on poker gambling. Therefore, total cancellation of legislation which provides public funding is not an option (even though its objectives have clearly not been achieved).

Nevertheless, it seems unfair that the larger and more powerful parties, which get the larger private donations, also receive the most from Public funds. This is rather like the AFL Grand Final teams being given the first 2 picks in the draft.

Currently very few members of the political parties ever see a copy of their party's audited accounts. The Australian Electoral Commission can arrange for independent audits, but this rarely happens. So, there appears to be very little real scrutiny of the receipts and payments.

Since the 'real' donors are Australians, whether they be taxpayers or shareholders or union members, it seems only fair that those people should be told very clearly how much they are donating and to whom.

So, what's to be done?

- Identify the objectives of public funding of electoral campaigns, and amend legislation so those objectives are likely to be achieved.
- Review the amount paid per Primary Vote. Consider whether it would assist the democratic process if there were a proportional scale, such that the 'value' of a Primary Vote for one of the three major parties was less than that for the minor parties.
- All registered political organizations should be required to produce to their members and to the Australian Electoral Commission annual audited accounts, showing total amounts received by donation and total amounts expended on election campaigns.
- All public companies and organisations such as unions should be required to report annually to their shareholders and members, the value of amounts donated to political parties. Superannuation funds should be required to report to their members the value of a company's donations, if the value of their shares in that company was 5% or more of the Fund's investments at any time during the year.

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