

SUBMISSION NO. 97



THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Research School of Social Sciences
CANBERRA ACT 0200
T: +61 (0)2 6125 0696
F: +61 (0)2 6125 3051
E: norm.kelly@anu.edu.au
W: <http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au>

30 March 2004

The Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Suite R2.105 Telelift 10.3
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Submission No. <u>97</u>
Date Received <u>30-3-05</u>
Secretary <u>[Signature]</u>

Dear Chairman,

Submission to the Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2004 Federal Election

The Democratic Audit of Australia uses an international audit framework developed by the International Institute of Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) to assess the health of democratic institutions. Further information about the Audit may be obtained from our website <http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au>

The Audit indicators are derived from the key democratic principles of political equality, popular control of government, civil liberties/human rights and the quality of public debate and deliberation. The principle of political equality includes the need for a level playing field for party competition (and for Independents) during elections and election campaigns. From the standpoint of these principles, there are a number of issues of concern which were highlighted by the 2004 election. Our attached submission is focused on the following issues:

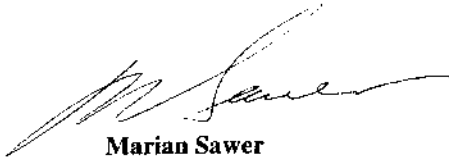
- Electoral funding and disclosure;
- Diminishment of the one vote, one value principle;
- Timing of the closure of electoral rolls;
- The growing informal vote;

- Above the line Senate tickets; and
- The use of parliamentary allowances and entitlements.

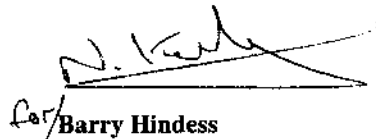
The submission commences with brief comments on the Audit's concerns with electoral funding and disclosure provisions. However, as your Committee is conducting a separate inquiry into this matter, we have not addressed these concerns in detail here.

We would appreciate the Committee letting us know when this submission has been authorised for publication so that we can put a link to it on the Democratic Audit web site.

Yours sincerely



Marian Sawer
Democratic Audit of Australia
The Australian National University



Barry Hindess
Research School of Social Sciences
The Australian National University

**DEMOCRATIC AUDIT OF AUSTRALIA – SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT
STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS**

INQUIRY INTO THE CONDUCT OF THE 2004 FEDERAL ELECTION

Marian Sawer
Peter Brent
Norm Kelly
Scott Brenton

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Electoral funding and disclosure

The Audit has serious concerns over the whole area of electoral funding and disclosure but we will not address these issues in detail here, given the Committee's parallel inquiry into these matters. We will, however, indicate that our concerns are of two major kinds:

- 1) the protracted delay in addressing the many loopholes that have been identified in the disclosure provisions of the Electoral Act and the need to require timely disclosure, particularly of large donations; and
- 2) the lack of any restrictions over the size or source of political donations or any cap on electoral expenditure, including expenditure on paid television advertising.

Internationally the issue of party finance is considered to be one of the key challenges for the future of democracy, but it seems to be a challenge that comparator democracies are dealing with more readily than Australia. For example, in 2003 Canada made it unlawful for corporations, unions or other entities to donate more than \$1000 per annum to a political party¹ while the United Kingdom in its *Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000* both introduced national campaign expenditure limits and required prior shareholder approval for corporate donations. New Zealand also has upper limits on campaign expenditure by political parties.

The objects of recent legislation in both Canada and the United Kingdom have been to prevent the risk of corruption posed by increasing reliance on large corporate donations. The perceptions of corruption induced by the reliance of political parties on corporate largesse have been associated globally with a sharp decline in confidence in political parties. Such confidence has also declined in Australia. When respondents to the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes were asked whether the federal government was run for a few big interests or the benefit of all people, *58 percent thought the federal*

¹ See Anthony Sayers and Lisa Young, 'Election Campaign and Party Financing in Canada', Democratic Audit of Australia, September 2004. <http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au>. For a more general comparative picture of the regulation of party finance see Reginald Austin and Maja Tjernström, *Funding of Political Parties and Election Campaigns*, Stockholm, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) 2003.

*government was run entirely or mostly for the benefit of big interests.*² This has implications for confidence in Australian democracy, as there is a moderately strong association between perceptions of how the government is run and pride in Australian democracy, that is, generally people who thought that the government was run for the benefit of big interests were less proud of the way democracy works in Australia (see Table 1). Furthermore, *60 percent of respondents thought that big business should have less or a lot less power.*³

Table 1: Pride in Australian Democracy and Perceptions of How the Government is Run

Perceptions of How the Government is Run	Pride in Australian Democracy (%)			
	Not proud at all	Not very proud	Somewhat proud	Very proud
Entirely run for a few big interests	50.9	45.3	3.8	0.0
Mostly run for a few big interests	28.4	56.3	14.6	0.7
Mostly run for the benefit of all	9.6	52.7	36.8	0.8
Entirely run for the benefit of all	6.5	35.8	53.9	3.8

$r = 0.484$

(Source: The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 2003)

Apart from the effects on confidence, the fact of large political donations to Australian political parties negates the principle of political equality, undermines the level playing field and weakens the competitiveness of the party system. Corporate donations are not allocated, like public funding, in accordance with share of the vote won, so some parties receive far more dollars per vote than do others. This inequality is compounded by lack of regulation of purchase of television advertising time. The laissez-faire attitude in Australia towards paid political advertising: (a) compounds inequality between political parties and; (b) creates a spending race between major political parties, with the cost of this race driving up the dependence on large corporate donations already discussed.

By contrast, the UK does not allow party purchase of airtime. In the UK, broadcasting licensees are required to provide slots for party political broadcasts (PPBs) as part of their public service broadcasting requirements, and such slots are also provided by the BBC

² Source: The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA), 2003. For further information see the AuSSA website: <http://aussa.anu.edu.au>

³ Ibid.

and S4C. The shortest are two minutes 40 seconds and the longest four minutes forty seconds. The UK Electoral Commission issued a report on PPBs in 2003, saying that the principle that parties should be able freely to publicise their platforms and policies to voters remained 'compelling'.⁴

In New Zealand time is allocated on Television New Zealand and Radio New Zealand but parties are also allocated funds by the Electoral Commission to purchase advertising on commercial channels. No purchase may be made beyond this allocation, which is based on votes won at the election or other indicators of popular support (such as opinion polls or party membership) in the case of new parties. The principle involved is again one of fairness, in providing the opportunity for registered political parties to communicate their policies to the public.⁵

Diminishment of the one vote, one value principle

The democratic principle of voting equality is largely adhered to in the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, subject to the requirements of the Australian Constitution. We are concerned however with the diminishment of this principle as a result of the passage of the *Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Representation in the House of Representatives) Act 2004*, which ensured that the Northern Territory retained two House of Representatives' seats at the 2004 election. This legislation set aside the Electoral Commissioner's determination in 2003, based on population figures, that the Northern Territory's representation in the House of Representatives be reduced from two seats to one seat. As a result, the impact on vote weighting at the 2004 Federal election was quite pronounced, as shown in Table 2 below. The Federal Parliament's decision doubled the weight, or value, of each Northern Territorian's vote.

⁴ UK Electoral Commission, *Party Political Broadcasting: Report and Recommendations*, January 2003, cited in Sarah Miskin and Richard Grant, *Political Advertising in Australia*, Parliamentary Library, Parliament of Australia, Research Brief No 5, 2004–05, pp. 12.

⁵ See the summary of provisions on the New Zealand Electoral Commission website: <http://www.elections.org.nz/esyst/parties.html>

Table 2: Enrolment numbers for House of Representatives electorates, by State/Territory (2004 election figures)

State / Territory	Average Enrolled per Electorate	Deviation from Aust. Avge (%)	Lowest Enrolment	Highest Enrolment
NSW	86,042	-0.9	78,039	95,065
Victoria	88,984	+2.5	81,769	94,897
Queensland	87,979	+1.3	81,526	93,416
West. Australia	82,490	-5.0	75,368	86,354
South Australia	95,438	+9.9	90,256	100,691
Tasmania	67,918	-21.8	65,492	69,212
ACT	112,448	+29.5	108,369	116,527
NT	55,825	-35.7	53,873	57,776
AUSTRALIA	86,808	-	53,873	116,527

(Source: AEC, 2004⁶)

Table 2 also shows the comparative inequality for ACT voters, which is due to the ACT's population falling slightly below 2.5 quotas, which would provide the ACT with a third seat (actually 2.42 quotas, as explained by Bell and Newman).⁷ However, the ACT's weakened franchise is exacerbated by the Parliament's decision on the Northern Territory, which created a situation where an ACT resident had less than half the voting power than a resident of the Northern Territory in the 2004 election. This is clearly not within the spirit or the intention of the Australian Constitution or the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*.

We also believe that it is dangerous to use population figures rather than enrolment figures as the basis for over-riding an Electoral Commissioner's decision, if the aim is to achieve voting equality. Approximately 71 per cent of the ACT population is enrolled to

⁶ Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) (2004) "Federal Election 2004: Close of Rolls", in *Electoral Newsfile*, No 118, September 2004, Australian Electoral Commission web site. Retrieved 8 October 2004, from http://www.aec.gov.au/_content/How/newsfiles/news118/Close_of_Rolls_2004.pdf

⁷ Bell and Newman (2004), Bills Digest No.121 2003-04, Parliamentary Library.

vote, whereas only 57 per cent of the NT population is enrolled.⁸ It appears that the Parliament has conveniently used these population figures to support the retention of an incumbent Member's seat rather than pursuing voting equality. We believe it is a failure of the legislation that the Northern Territory has the same number of seats as the ACT despite having less than half the enrolments.

While various arguments were put forward at the time as to why the Parliament should over-ride the AEC, the issue of voter turnout does not appear to have been canvassed. We believe that the historically low level of voter turnout in the Northern Territory (when compared to all other states and the ACT), and particularly in the seat of Lingiari, compounds the action of the Parliament to move away from the principle of voting equality. In the 2004 election, turnout in the Northern Territory was 84.25%, more than 10 per cent below the national average (94.32 per cent), and more than 8 per cent below the next lowest ranked jurisdiction (Western Australia – 92.79 per cent). Voter turnout in Lingiari was only 77.71 per cent. These figures show a genuine need for additional elector education and publicity in the Northern Territory to increase voter turnout.

Timing of the closure of electoral rolls

We have serious concerns that the uncertainty created by not having a fixed election date impacts on the rush for new or changed voter enrolments between the announcement of the election date and the close of rolls. While this submission does not enter into the debate on the merits or otherwise of fixed election dates versus the current situation of the Prime Minister being able to determine the election date, we believe it is important that while the current situation exists, a suitable amount of time needs to be provided from the calling of an election to allow for Australians to enrol or to change an existing enrolment.

Figures from the Australian Electoral Commission show that for the 2004 election, 423,975 enrolment cards (for changes of enrolment details or new enrolments) were received in the seven business days between the announcement of the election and the

⁸ Using Bell and Newman (2004), Bills Digest No. 121 2003-04, Parliamentary Library, and AEC (2004).

close of rolls. This represents 3.3 per cent of all enrolments, or an average 2,827 enrolments for each House of Representatives division. Of these, 78,816 (or 525 per HoR division) were new enrolments.

In addition, this period allows eligible Australians who are overseas, time to become aware of the election announcement and to apply for enrolment or an enrolment change. This aspect has gained added importance with the relaxation in recent years of eligibility requirements for overseas Australians.

The Australian Electoral Commission works hard at educating and informing the Australian public on enrolment requirements, and the week following the calling of an election is a critical time in reminding Australians of these rights and responsibilities. We believe that if the integrity of enrolments (i.e. voters registered at their current address) is to be maintained, and that people eligible to be enrolled are to be encouraged to enrol, this period of time needs to be provided for in future elections. It is our view that this period of time should only be dispensed with if the Parliament amends legislation to provide for fixed election dates.

The growing informal vote

The 2001 JSCEM Report noted that the 2001 informal vote for the House of Representatives (4.8 per cent) was the fourth highest since Federation (p.166-7). At the 2004 election, the informal vote was even higher – 5.2 per cent, the largest since 1984. In the context of generally close Australian election results, this is a very large number.

If an informal vote is made deliberately, that is one thing, and might be described as a problem for the political parties. But if tens – or perhaps hundreds – of thousands of Australians are attempting to record a formal vote, but are unsuccessful, then that is our problem as a community. Evidence points to this being the case. We might say that they 'should' have known how to formally record a vote, but ultimately if we as a nation see it as in the interests of the health of our democracy to record the preferences of all those

who wish to express them at election time, and the system is breaking down, we should address it.

Of course, we can never totally disaggregate the deliberate from the accidental informal vote, but we can look for strong clues. After the 2001 election the Australian Electoral Commission analysed all informal votes and placed them into the following categories, State by State. (It is the second row, 'Number 1', that we are most interested in here.)

Table 3 Informal votes by State and category at the 2001 Federal election⁹

Type	NSW	QLD	VIC	WA	SA	TAS	ACT	NT	NAT
Blanks	20.38	15.67	24.95	23.36	24.52	27.86	30.84	20.74	21.43
Number 1	32.47	46.42	26.05	29.87	36.63	23.60	28.76	27.95	33.58
Ticks and Crosses	12.57	11.46	12.97	9.93	14.95	15.84	8.99	10.62	12.42
Langer Style	2.37	2.00	3.22	4.18	1.05	6.88	0.83	14.56	2.68
Non Sequential	22.52	10.49	14.15	21.75	13.40	13.17	7.66	15.06	17.18
Voter Identified	0.04	0.03	0.07	0.11	0.03	0.02	0.04	0.00	0.04
Marks	5.49	4.91	8.23	7.78	5.97	12.11	4.20	2.98	6.31
Slogans making numbering illegible	0.28	0.30	0.42	0.18	0.57	0.01	0.05	0.00	0.31
Other	3.87	8.72	3.98	2.83	2.87	0.51	18.63	8.09	6.00
Total	5.42	4.83	3.98	4.92	5.54	3.40	3.52	4.64	4.82

⁹ Table 3 from http://www.aec.gov.au/content/What/voting/research_2001Elections.htm (last accessed 18 March 2005)

The 'Alternative Vote' preferential voting system for the House of Representatives is possibly the best way of gathering votes in single-member electorates. But it does have its drawbacks, one of which is that it is rather difficult to understand – even for political journalists.

As well, different States have different electoral systems to elect members to their lower houses: New South Wales and Queensland use optional preferential voting for State elections, compulsory preferential is used federally and in Western Australia and Victoria. Hare-Clark (proportional representation) is used in Tasmania. (Tasmanians are relatively low informal voters at federal elections.) South Australia has compulsory preferential voting but with a ticket vote meaning that just voting '1' is, in nearly all cases, a formal vote. The States also have various voting methods for their upper houses. We might imagine that these different jurisdictions cause confusion, and the data above lends support to this.

Looking at the second row of Table 3 – the percentage of voters putting just a 'Number 1' – we can see that the three States in which a formal vote can be registered at a State election for the lower house by just voting '1' (NSW, Queensland and SA) recorded the three highest levels of that kind of informal federal vote in 2001. In Queensland these accounted for almost half (46.42 per cent) of all informal votes.

We can assess the second largest category, 'blank ballot slips' at 21.43 per cent, as predominantly deliberate. But not so the third largest category, voters numbering candidates non-sequentially, of which there were 17.18 per cent. Again, we might intuit most of these to be non-deliberate. The category 'Langer style'¹⁰ is more likely than not to be accidental informal votes, as are 'ticks and crosses' and 'non-sequential'. All of

¹⁰ 'Langer style': numbering every square but using at least one number more than once so that the vote exhausts. This was a formal vote until and including the 1996 Federal election, but following the 1996 election the JSCEM successfully recommended that the Electoral Act be changed to make such a vote informal.

these – some 66 per cent of the total – would have been valid votes in SA¹¹, Queensland or NSW – and we can at least argue that most of these were accidental informal votes.

The breakdown for the 2004 election was not available at the time of writing, but the totals of informal voting for each State are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Informal Votes at the 2004 Federal election¹²

State/ Territory	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	ACT	NT	AUST
Informal Vote (%)	6.1	4.1	5.2	5.3	5.6	3.6	3.4	4.5	5.2

We can see that New South Wales replaced South Australia as the state with the highest informal vote. NSW, Victoria and Queensland all recorded substantial increases, but Queensland's was by far the largest. (There was a Queensland election seven months before the federal poll, at which political leaders, most notably the Premier, advocated voters just voting '1', as is allowed in that State. It will be interesting to see if the AEC's analysis shows an even larger contribution to the total from the 'Number 1' category.)

Why do non-deliberate informal votes appear to be rising? There are four main likely factors:

- (1) The introduction of 'above the line' voting for the Senate in 1984, and probable confusion arising among some voters from the fact that they could now cast a valid vote by marking only one box above the line.
- (2) In the last three decades, the number of mainland jurisdictions in which a formal vote can be registered for a lower house without numbering every square has gone from zero to three.
- (3) The increasing numbers of candidates on ballot papers.

¹¹ In South Australia a 'non-sequential' vote may not have been counted.

¹² Source http://www.aec.gov.au/_content/how/newsfiles/121/house_of_reps_results.pdf

- (4) There appears to be a correlation between high numbers of voters from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB) and levels of informal voting.¹³ The Greenway electorate in New South Wales is an example.

In any event, we do not have to make assumptions about every voter's intention to realise that many, many Australians are casting informal votes accidentally.

Possible solutions to the increasing informal vote

What can be done? Education and advertising are often stock-standard responses, but may have limited impact. On the other hand, it may make sense to target education at new voters from NESB countries. Additionally, some kind of intervention in the polling station, such as larger and more numerous posters, would be useful.

Achieving uniform voting laws across the country is unlikely and of debatable desirability.

Less onerous criteria for a vote to be counted as formal is an obvious avenue. But how? In the context of preferential voting, this may be in a move to Optional Preferential Voting, but many see this as a step towards the undesirable 'first past the post' system.

Another possible reform might be seen in the South Australian system. Parties there can register tickets with the Electoral Office, and if a partially filled in ballot slip is consistent with a registered ticket¹⁴, it is deemed to have all its squares filled out as per that ticket. It is still illegal in South Australia to advocate voting only '1', and the State Electoral Office informs voters they should number every square. But their voting system is designed to 'catch' as many votes as possible.

¹³ See, for example, Sally Young, 'Wasted Votes? Informal voting and the 2004 election.' <http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au/Young-InformalVoting2004.pdf>

¹⁴ For example, a voter fills in 1,2 and 3 but leaves the rest blank. If a registered ticket has the same candidates as 1,2 and 3 the voter's further preferences are deemed to be as the registered ticket. If a voter just puts a '1' next to the Liberal or Labor candidate, this will of course be consistent with a ticket (because those parties will have registered tickets) and will be formally counted.

Once a voting system counts ballot papers that only choose one candidate, it can then relax its standards and count papers with a cross, a tick or some other clear indication of one candidate. It can also count preferences up to the point a mistake was made on a ballot paper. (Both of these conditions apply in NSW and Queensland, and the first applies in SA.)

As a democratic society we want to count the vote of everyone who tries to register a formal vote, no matter their education level, English proficiency or intelligence. While this may not be one hundred per cent achievable, if we truly believe all the things we say about democracy and 'the vote', then we must explore ways to rectify this growing problem.

(For AEC paper on the 2001 informal vote see http://www.aec.gov.au/content/What/voting/research_2001Elections.htm)

'Above the Line' Senate Tickets¹⁵

'Above the line' ticket voting for the Australian Senate is not living up to the justifications for its introduction in 1984. It was meant to be an efficient and easy way for voters to register their votes, but increasingly today leads to distortion of those very preferences.

It is one thing for a candidate who trails on primary votes to win after distribution of preferences. That's how preferential systems often work. But it's another when deals done by party bosses – and not voters' desires – are responsible for a party with less than two per cent support winning a Senate seat ahead of another which got nearly nine per cent. This happened in the Victorian Senate count at the 2004 federal election, and it could happen again, anywhere.

¹⁵ Based on a paper, "Above the Line Senate tickets – Time to Scrap the Ticket Vote in the Senate?" – written by Peter Brent in 2004 for the Democratic Audit: <http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au/BrentPaper.pdf>

We need to locate above/below-the-line voting in the domestic electoral context. Australians grow up on preferential voting. In our Upper Houses elected by proportional representation (PR), such as the Senate, this takes the form of the Single Transferable Vote (STV). In effect the STV ballot slip asks voters to contemplate not only who they would most like to see elected, but also two other scenarios: that their preferred candidate/party receives in excess of the votes required, and so has some to spare; or alternatively that their candidate is unsuccessful. What would they like done with their excess/unsuccessful votes?

Now, in reality it is more complicated than that, but the concept of ranking candidates by order of preference is simple and practical. However, nine out of ten Senate voters do not do that anymore, and the reason is above-the-line voting.

Approximately 90 per cent of voters use the 'above the line' option, but most have no idea where their preferences flow, and simply rely on the parties to distribute them appropriately. Yes, they can find where their votes are going: the 'tickets' are available on the internet if they know where to look, or they can visit an Australian Electoral Commission office. They are available in polling booths on election day. But very few people take the time, and certainly, just filling out the below-the-line is quicker. (And choosing one box above-the-line even more so.)

It was a good idea at the time, but the reality today is that parties do 'deals' for preferences. And an increasing feature of these 'deals' is that they are less based on philosophical or policy considerations or the likely preferences of party voters, and more on perceived electoral self-interest. These perceptions are also often misplaced. Family First is the religious party that few outside South Australia had heard of until mid 2004. The party won a Senate seat in Victoria at the 2004 federal election with a vote of 1.9 per cent. Family First managed to convince hard-heads in most of the main parties, and many of the minor ones (though not the Greens), to 'swap' preferences with them.

Of course, preferences (in the same electorate/State) are never really 'swapped'. An agreement is made that whoever either gets a quota first, or drops out first, will 'give' preferences to the other. Family First made deals with a plethora of other parties. Some, like the Catholic conservative Democratic Labor Party (DLP), could be seen as fellow travelers, but not so others (such as Labor and the Australian Democrats). Given the incongruity of swapping the same 'thing' with various other parties, we must assume that Family First's preference negotiators are persuasive. (The labyrinth nature of STV provides cover for smoke and mirror presentations).

Family First's preference negotiations achieved them a Senate seat in Victoria with 1.9 per cent of the vote, and almost a second seat in Tasmania with slightly higher support. (They were foiled by Tasmanian voters' characteristically high 'below the line' vote, which is an accurate record of preferences.)

Few Australians appear to fully understand the STV Senate voting system. This does not really matter if it does not distort the way people vote, but today it does. Nine out of ten Australians give their Senate vote to parties to distribute as they see fit, and the subsequent preference flows would often surprise the voter if only they knew – with no philosophical or political rhyme or reason.

The political persuasion of the parties involved is not relevant to this discussion. The question is how well our electoral system reflects the will of voters.

The secret ballot was introduced a century and a half ago to guarantee that every vote reflected the will of the voter. The 'above the line' option, in the reality it is currently placed, provides great incentive for Australians to hand their votes over to party apparatchiks. Either a method should be found to ensure voters know how their 'above the line' vote is to be distributed, or the whole system should be changed.

New South Wales recently acted on this after bizarre election results for its Legislative Council at the 1995 and 1999 elections. It kept the 'above the line' concept but did away with the ticket altogether, instead allowing voters to either rank as many party groups

'above the line' as they wished, or to rank, as before, at least individuals below the line. This is a good starting point for a change to the system for electing Australian Senators.

Use of parliamentary allowances and entitlements

Administrative changes for the use of parliamentary printing and postal allowances have created an unfair advantage to incumbent Members and Senators. We view this as a shift away from the democratic principle of political equality for candidates in an election.

Incumbency brings with it many benefits for Members and Senators during election campaigns, including having a raised profile, a record of parliamentary action (often including parliamentary positions such as portfolios and committee work), electorate office resources and staffing to assist in promoting this parliamentary work, and increased media attention. We believe that these benefits of incumbency are sufficient to assist existing Members and Senators in campaigning against other party and non-party candidates. Interestingly, a recent Parliamentary Library Research Note (No.30, 2004-05) refers to a comment from a former party president that the benefits of incumbency are worth more than \$1.5m to a Member over three years.¹⁶

However, we believe the following incumbency entitlements are excessive and work against the holding of fair and democratic elections:

Staff travel and overtime during the election campaign – although it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between parliamentary-related work and electioneering, it is clear that staff entitlements are being abused, with resources being increasingly used for electioneering purposes. We believe that parliamentary staff should only be assisting their own Senator or Member.

¹⁶ Michael Kroger, former Victorian Liberal Party president, cited by Dr Sarah Miskin in Research Note No.30, 2004-05, Parliamentary Library.

Our recommendation is that staff entitlements (including salary and travel) should cease upon the calling of an election. In the absence of this, far greater resources should be employed to monitor and audit the system.

Postal and printing allowances – the cost of parliamentary printing allowances has increased substantially over the past decade, and it must be asked whether the Australian electorate is better informed as a result. If such allowances were restricted to informing a Member's electorate of her/his performance, it could be argued to be a legitimate expense. However, the Parliament has allowed these allowances to be used for electioneering purposes¹⁷, which creates a significant bias against candidates who are either not members of parliament OR do not have access to the resources of members of parliament.

In addition, the provision to allow unspent printing allowances to be carried over to the following financial year, combined with the ability to use the allowance for election purposes, creates an ideal environment for members to stockpile taxpayer-funded resources to finance election campaigns.

Our recommendation is that the use of parliamentary printing and postal allowances for election-related purposes should be prohibited. This prohibition should include the production and distribution of postal vote applications, which subverts the independent work of the Australian Electoral Commission. In addition, carryover provisions for entitlements should be removed (or at least, significantly reduced).

¹⁷ Peter Andren, 'Level Democratic Playing Field – You Must Be Joking', from Democratic Audit of Australia web site, at www.democratic.audit.anu.edu.au/AndrenPaper.pdf