

MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Workplace Relations Advertising Campaigns

Mr. KELVIN THOMSON (Wills) (3.55 p.m.)—While current opinion polls provide little guidance as to what the result of a federal election in six months time might be, they make it clear that the electorate want the government to start listening to them. The electorate do not want to listen to more of your message, especially when it is their money paying for it. But what has the government's response to this been? It has been to get out the megaphone and to torch more taxpayers' dollars in the process. How out of touch is that? All this government's characteristic trickiness has been on display in this latest shabby episode.

First we had the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations yesterday tell radio broadcaster John Laws that the advertising booking is less than \$5 million. Mr Laws asked whether that was per week and the minister said, 'No, for this first tranche.' Honourable members might be curious to know just how long a tranche is. Today it turns out that the first tranche is in fact one week long. So John Laws was right. They say a week is a long time in politics. It is long enough to spend over \$4 million of taxpayers' money and long enough to mislead John Laws's audience.

Then there was the trickiness from the Special Minister of State, Minister Nairn, who told the House yesterday that the government approved the advertising campaign because it passed the value for money test. That is plain ridiculous. The minister was unable to tell the House how much the advertising campaign would cost. How can it possibly be value for money if you do not know what the cost is? It is like going home to your family and saying: 'I've just bought a horse. I think it'll be great value for money,' and when the family asks, 'How much did it cost?' you say, 'I don't know. The owner hasn't sent me the bill yet.'

The master of trickiness is the Prime Minister. He was reported as saying, 'We have to spend this money to counter the campaigns being run by Labor and the trade unions.' This would be fair enough if the Liberal Party were paying for it, but it is not; taxpayers are paying. Advertising funded by taxpayers should not be used in areas of political controversy to counter the campaigns of others. Taxpayer funded advertising should be in nonpartisan areas—public service job advertisements or public interest advertising such as tips on water wastage or how to cut your electricity bill. Advertising funded by taxpayers should not be about measures which are yet to receive parliamentary approval—as, once again, we are seeing today.

This willingness to use taxpayer funds for Liberal Party propaganda is a trademark of a government which has been in power so long that it can no longer see any distinction between the public interest and the Liberal Party's interests. It now treats them as one and the same. The government is increasingly drunk with power and the longer it stays in office the more contemptuous of the national interest it becomes.

We have had a massive advertising binge with something like \$1.7 billion spent in the course of the last decade. When we looked at Senate estimates last May, we discovered that a staggering \$250 million was proposed for advertising expenditure in the lead-up to the next election. There was \$50 million proposed for private health insurance; \$47 million for the smartcard awareness campaign—you can write to every Australian household many times with \$47 million; \$36

million for child support reforms; and \$15 million for independent contractors. That \$250 million came on top of a \$130 million advertising placement spend for the previous financial year. So it is \$380 million all up—a breathtaking abuse of taxpayers' money. And it is taxpayers who are footing the bill for political advertising in the lead-up to this election campaign, not the Liberal Party.

The Australian public should brace themselves for wave after wave of propaganda along the scale of last year's **industrial relations** campaign. That campaign raised the bar of government advertising and the government clearly has no intention of lowering it. We had the artist formerly known as Prince; now we have the adfest formerly known as Work Choices.

This is a government that cheats. Government members parade and strut around here like winners, but they do not believe in a fair contest. Here they are on taxpayer-funded steroids. We know about the increase in the printing entitlement for incumbent MPs from \$125,000 to \$150,000 a year; we know about the \$1.7 billion spent on notorious campaigns such as the GST Unchain My Heart ads, the strengthening Medicare campaign and the Work Choices campaign, on which \$55 million was spent. After the Unchain My Heart campaign, the Auditor-General produced a set of guidelines designed to draw the line between bona fide government advertising and political advertising, for which the Liberal Party should be paying, not taxpayers. The government never adopted those guidelines and it is still at it with further allocations in the last two budgets. We saw it again with the sale of Telstra. It did not allocate anything for the sale of Telstra, but that did not stop it. It went out there with \$20 million of taxpayers' dollars to talk up the Telstra sale and try to undo some of the damage it had done with its interference in the management of Telstra.

Then there was Medibank Private. Norman Lindsay popularised the expression 'the magic pudding' with his book of the same name. The government plans to spend \$52 million of taxpayers money on Medibank Private, in its words, 'to increase consumer awareness of the incentives and benefits associated with private health insurance'—a general marketing campaign, jointly funded with industry, to provide consumers with 'relevant information'. Again, we have more taxpayers' dollars, in the form of government advertising, suggesting that it will be a fine thing for shareholders to buy into Medibank Private. But then the government says that premiums will not go up, so fund members will be okay. Let us see: premiums will not go up, but it will be a good buy for investors. That is truly a magic pudding and Norman Lindsay will be mightily impressed.

Some of the people who would benefit from this advertising splurge are those in the advertising agencies. I mentioned that the government spent \$12.4 million promoting the first tranche of the Telstra sale and \$13.1 million promoting the second tranche. It is out there again kissing goodbye to \$20 million of taxpayers' dollars. When we look at the advertising agencies such as those run by Ted Horton and Mark Pearson, it turns out that the Liberal Party advertisers profit from these campaigns. The government might like to tell us who will get the advertising contracts for the latest advertising binge.

A secretive political gang known as the Ministerial Committee on Government Communications, involving some of the Liberal Party's campaigning insiders, awards the advertising contracts. It is a secretive process and it is time the government came clean about the basis on which contracts are awarded. The Clerk of the Senate, Harry Evans, was quite right to express his concern about the potential for corruption inherent in these arrangements. It is absolutely extraordinary that we can have tens of millions of taxpayers' dollars wasted on a

campaign designed to convince the Australian public to change their opinion about something they do not want. It is propaganda.

In 2005 I presented a private member's bill designed to straighten out this whole area of government advertising and to ensure that we get proper scrutiny based on the Auditor-General's guidelines. With apologies to Winston Churchill, never before in the history of government advertising has so much money been hosed up against a wall by so few in so short a time. The government has taken a cigarette lighter to taxpayers' funds. We have heard stories of excess, such as the man who was paid \$6,000 for a morning's work as an extra on a set. That is the kind of thing that happens if there are no proper checks and controls in place.

It was George Orwell who saw clearly and who nailed in books like *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the way in which fascist and Communist governments of the 1930s used government resources to indoctrinate their own populations, to manipulate people and to elevate political propaganda to an art form. You would have to wonder what George Orwell would make of today's government advertising campaigns if he were still alive. I suspect that he would see, as he did in the 1930s, the outrageous irony of governments using the people's resources to manipulate them and to keep them acquiescent, passive and apathetic. It is nearly 12 years since the Prime Minister promised to put in place some guidelines from the Auditor-General. The Australian people remember that notorious non-core promise; it was a deceptive piece of propaganda designed to get voters to support him.