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**KELVIN THOMSON** (Wills) (9.42 am)—This government came to power amid much fanfare about improving ministerial standards and accountability. But, after the Prime Minister's ministerial code of ministerial claimed ministerial scalps by the bucketload in its first 18 months of operation, the Prime Minister declared it not a death sentence and it has been all downhill from there. There was no ministerial responsibility taken for the debacle over weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The absolute low point was this: there was no ministerial, or indeed any, responsibility taken for the AWB scandal. The foreign affairs minister and other ministers ignored dozens of warnings and permitted an Australian company with a legislated monopoly on wheat exports to pay \$300 million in kickbacks to Saddam Hussein. We had the Cole inquiry into this scandal and the government hid behind this inquiry, refusing to answer questions in the House of Representatives or Senate estimates committees on the grounds that an inquiry was taking place. But what has become of the inquiry? Nothing. The AWB's export monopoly remains in place, with the agriculture minister continuing to veto applications from any other company wanting to export wheat. What on earth has happened to the criminal charges the Cole inquiry recommended be laid against senior AWB personnel? The Attorney-General is just sitting on this matter. I have heard that people who would expect to be witnesses in the AWB scandal trials have not even been contacted by police. It is nearly a year since the release of the Cole report. What on earth is going on? Now the equine flu virus has got into Australia as a result of the breakdown in our quarantine arrangements. Just as in the AWB scandal, the government has set up an inquiry to be carried out by one of its favourite sons and is now hiding behind it.

What can be done about such lamentable standards of public accountability? The good news is that the Australasian Study of Parliament Group Accountability Working Party has produced an excellent report, titled *Be honest, minister!* The report is the work of former Victorian MPs

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Ken Coghill and Race Mathews from the Labor side and Alan Hunt—a great former member—and Victor Perton from the Liberal side, as well as distinguished academics and public accountability experts.

I do not have time to do justice to its many recommendations, but I do recommend it to anyone interested in lifting the low standards of public accountability which now apply in Australia. Its recommendations include making federal ministers' staff and advisors answerable to parliamentary committees, as state ministers staff can be compelled to do, to stop ministers hiding behind their staff. They propose a simple, innovative and effective form of electronic registration and disclosure of lobbying to deal with this murky area of special access by vested interests to federal ministers—access which is often invisible—and they propose the reform of freedom of information legislation to restore the original intent that information not be withheld except on very limited public interest grounds, such as where national security is genuinely at risk.