



Grievance Debate: Monday, 17 September 2007
House of Representatives

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The Federal election draws ever closer. In most countries the big question when they have an election is, who will win?

In Australia, almost as big a question is, when will it be?

In my view this is an anachronism, a hangover from the past. It's time we moved to set our election dates – to fix the length of the parliamentary term.

The United States has fixed election dates for its President, every four years – everyone knows when the vote will be held. It is a much better arrangement than the uncertainty, speculation, and opportunism that we have in Australia. Many other countries have moved to fixed four year terms – Finland, Norway, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland among others.

In Australia the States and Territories have been moving to set their election dates – everyone knows when the next elections will be held in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. This is a good system for everyone – it gives business certainty, it gives the voters certainty, and it adds a measure of decorum to the whole political process.

In my view 4 year elections are better than 3 year periods. While I have no wish to see governments avoid scrutiny, and am all in favour of accountability mechanisms such as freedom of information, controls on election expenditure and lobbying, whistleblower protection, and robust Senate Estimates Committees, I think we have too many elections in Australia. The average period between Federal elections since 1901 has been 945 days, or 31.5 months, well short of the 3 years provided by the Constitution. And of course we have a plethora of State elections to add to that.

So it's time we put a stop to the Prime Minister having this power to call an election at a time of his choosing. Prime Ministers don't use this power in the national interest, they use it in their party's interest or even their own interest!. The power allows for arbitrary, partisan and capricious election dates, and it generates uncertainty, speculation, and game-playing. Its' time is up.

People will quite reasonably ask, what about the Senate. Clearly we should have simultaneous elections for the Senate and the House of Representatives. Labor's National Conference has resolved in favour of simultaneous 4 year fixed terms for both the House and the Senate. This avoids having Senators who would be elected for 8 years. It lowers the threshold for election to the Senate, and therefore gives minor parties a much better chance to be elected.

The truth is that the Labor Party treats the minor parties much better than they treat us. We reformed the Victorian Legislative Council with the introduction of proportional representation, which enabled 3 Greens Party members to get elected. They could never have got elected to the old Legislative Council in a pink fit. We didn't get any thanks for that. The Greens Party are mostly voting with the Liberal Party in the Legislative Council.

Nevertheless, it is better that we run the risk of minor parties controlling the Senate than continue to have an uncertain, outdated system with too many elections and too much power in the hands of the Prime Minister. There is not much to be said from recent experience in favour of the Government controlling the Senate. They rammed through Work Choices, leaving employees vulnerable to instant dismissal for no reason at all, and stifled proper attempts to have the Senate investigate the AWB scandal.

While a nation waits with bated breath for an election to be called – well at least some of it does – we are being subjected to a veritable blitzkrieg of taxpayer funded advertising promoting the Liberal Party's policies and actions. I remind the House that in September 1995 - 12 years ago – then Opposition Leader John Howard promised that a Liberal Government would “ask the Auditor-General to establish a set of guidelines” for government advertising and said “We will run our advertisements past the Auditor-General and they will need to satisfy those guidelines”. This turned out to be one of the Prime Minister's notorious non-core promises, a deceptive piece of propaganda designed to get voters to support him. It spent a staggering \$1.7 billion in the past decade on such notorious propaganda campaigns as the GST Unchain My Heart ads, the Strengthening Medicare campaign, and the Work Choices campaign. Back in the 1930s George Orwell saw clearly, and nailed, in books like *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty Four*, the way in which fascist and communist governments used government resources to indoctrinate their own populations, to manipulate people and to elevate political propaganda to an art form.

One wonders what George Orwell would make of today's government advertising campaigns if he were still alive. I suspect he would see, as he did back in the 1930s, the outrageous irony of governments using the people's own resources to manipulate them and to keep them acquiescent, passive and apathetic.

After the Unchain My Heart campaign, the Auditor-General, to his credit, 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 ignored those guidelines.

Two years ago, in September 2005, I presented to the Parliament a Private Member's Bill, the Government Advertising (Prohibiting Use of Taxpayers' Money on Party Political Advertising) Bill of 2005. It would have delivered on the Prime Minister's 1995 promise to bring to bear the independent authority of the Auditor-general on government advertising.

The Auditor-General had proposed guidelines to ensure government advertising "be presented in an objective and fair manner" and "not be liable to misrepresentation as party political". My Private Member's Bill would have made these guidelines a legal requirement for Governments. My Private Member's Bill of 2005, like the Auditor-General's Report of 1998, was ignored.

And what have been the consequences? While all the polls are indicating the electorate wants the government to listen to it more, to pay more attention to it, instead the Government is out there with a taxpayer-funded megaphone, a taxpayer-funded loud hailer, screaming into the electorate's ear because they think the electorate will get the message if only the government yells a little louder. We have had a renewed avalanche of Workchoices advertising. In May the Special Minister of State told the House the government had approved the advertising campaign because it passed the value for money test. Yet the Minister was unable to tell the House how much the advertising campaign would cost. That is plain ridiculous. How can it possibly be value for money if you don't know what the cost is? It's 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"!

And last week the Government launched a new climate change initiative; not ratifying Kyoto, or bringing in emissions trading, or lifting the Renewable Energy Target, all of which would be useful, but – you guessed it – an advertising initiative – a \$25 million climate change advertising campaign. A Government which spends zero point O five % of the Federal Budget on tackling climate change can find \$25 million for an advertising campaign. Point O five is a blood alcohol limit, not a climate change strategy!

Since the last election we've seen

- \$93 million spent advertising Workchoices, the policy that dare not speak its name,
- \$63 million spent on superannuation advertising,
- \$27 million spent advertising private health insurance, and the
- \$25 million climate change campaign, to which I've just referred.

\$200 million of taxpayers' money in just this year – with apologies to Winston Churchill, never before has so much money been hosed up against a wall, by so few, in so short a time.

As well as introducing fixed dates for federal elections, and introducing curbs on taxpayer-funded advertising, there is much more we can do to lift standards of public accountability. Last Thursday in the Main Committee I referred the House to the publication by the Australasian Study of Parliament Group Accountability Working Party, titled "*Be Honest, Minister! Restoring Honest Government in Australia*". That paper makes numerous serious recommendations to improve the conduct and accountability of Ministers. It includes a detailed section on contact with lobbyists, and proposes the registration of all lobbying activity. It proposes curbs on the post-Parliamentary employment of Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries to tackle the perception of impropriety where holders of ministerial office have accepted lucrative employment or directorships shortly after leaving office. This is especially concerning where the former Minister's new employer has benefited from a decision made by the Minister during their period in office.

The Working Party recommends that it be a condition of ministerial appointment that, after ceasing to hold appointment as a Minister, he or she may not accept any substantial benefit (employment, directorships, consultancies, etc.) for a period of five years from a company with which they had official dealings. In the case of Parliamentary Secretaries the cooling off period is proposed to be two years.

If this Government wants to show it has a vision for the future, as opposed to a desire to desperately cling on to power, it should pick up some of these reforms and implement them. Better late than never.