

GRIEVANCE DEBATE –DEMOCRACY

I am today grieving for the state of democracy in this country. Hopefully the result in Pittwater at the weekend is a healthy sign voters are rejecting arrogance in government, whether it is in the form of Industrial relations changes with absolutely no mandate or party candidates imposed on electorates from outside.

We must never assume, as some may try and tell us that we are a paradigm of democratic values in this country. The more I look at local, state and federal electoral systems in Australia the more I see an erosion of individual rights and suppression of individual will.

Within our parliaments, executive dominance is a cancer eroding the role of MPs in debating, amending and overseeing laws. The role of legislators is being usurped by executive federal government and its extra-parliamentary body The Council of Australian Government.

The current farce of an informed debate and inquiry into counter terrorism laws stands in stark contrast to the UK. There, the three major terrorism laws prior to 2004 are reviewed annually by independent reviewer Lord Carlisle, while the latest 2005 law is subject to a 3 monthly report on control orders from the Home Secretary as well as Lord Carlisle's annual review. In Australia there will be no independent review.

COAG has become a defacto governing council, and when ACT Chief Minister John Stanhope chose to let the people know about the draft counter-terrorism bill he was pilloried for making it available on his website...and ignored thereafter by the Prime Minister.

Stanhope's actions led to the public debate we weren't supposed to have. It forced an extension – pitifully short as it has been- in the scrutiny and debate of this momentous legislation.

There is a lack of transparency in COAG that threatens the role of parliament. Conventions of secrecy and bureaucratic confidentiality plague the process, further reducing parliamentary scrutiny especially of crucially important human rights legislation, as with the terror laws.

Here in this winner take all democracy- crucial public policy issues – the IR reforms, the sale of Telstra, the security legislation have had totally inadequate scrutiny. Truncated inquiry and truncated debate.

There are no House legislation reference committees – we pathetically wait here for the outcome of Senate inquiries..or at least those of us who might be interested in being anything other than a number in divisions. Now we have proposals to put monitors in the chamber so members know what they're voting on.

How many times have we debated bills before even a draft digest was available, let alone any inquiry outcomes. I related this lack of process to a former magistrate the other day and he was absolutely horrified at this disrespect for elected representatives.

Despite less than flattering descriptions of the Senate –notably by the former PM Keating- that chamber is far more representative of the kaleidoscope of Australian politics than this democratic backwater.

One can only hope the voters will appreciate the loss of review in that place post July and restore a Senate representation that truly reflects the public's will – not one manufactured by party deals.

Such representation won't unfortunately be achieved in the people's house. That can't happen until we have Proportional Representation in this place too. The overwhelming number of western democracies –apart from the UK, Canada, US and Australia (all relics of outdated and irrelevant Westminsterism) – have a form of PR.

Despite those who would try and discredit Proportional Representation the truth is that first past the post and **majoritarian** preferential voting are far less democratic outcomes than PR. There is nothing wrong with minority government. We have had it in the Senate for two decades and people like it.

It provides for consultation, compromise even consensus – strange words I know for this government and the major political parties – but exactly what people expect.

Alliances and consensus and negotiation are the cornerstones of modern democracies. See what is happening in Israel, in Germany, in New Zealand.

The electorate can engage on an issue by issue basis, as it yearns to do here now in Australia on Industrial relations Laws (rammed through with no mandate), the privatisation of Telstra in the face of overwhelming opposition, anti terror legislation – and no doubt changes to electoral laws and media ownership just down the track.

At every opportunity the major parties in this country are trying to shore up their falling primary vote by corrupting the process. Fifty five million dollars of public money squandered on an IR propaganda campaign. Eleven thousand television spots bought by the government in October - \$26 million (part of the \$55 million IR blitz) spent by this government on advertising across all media in October. Government by spin- government by media event-government by deceit.

And the tap is not turned off for elections as it should be with parties using their own resources. No, its opened even wider with flagrant abuse of the so-called conventions applying to use of staff and overtime, printing allowances, cars, phones, air travel, electorate offices and so it goes.

Now there are plans to lift to **\$5-thousand** dollars the disclosure limit for donations to major parties- parties who already share around \$40 million at last dip of public funding. The Electoral Commission is unable to track many donations, Auditor general recommendations are ignored, and we see the brazen selling of access to ministers through devices like the Victorian ALPs ‘Progressive Business’ or the Prime Minister’s Millennium Forum with price tags up to \$20 thousand dollars.

At a local government level there’s the sad tale of the corrupted Tweed Council, sacked after some pseudo independent candidates were sponsored into council by developers. Commissioner Maurie Daly’s suggested cap on the individual campaign spending of council candidates should be extended to state and federal parliaments.

I’ve suggested \$50,000 per candidate properly audited and reported by each candidate-not the party- is the way to go. Otherwise we will be the second best democracy money can buy after the US where Congressional candidates each require about \$750,000 every two years – raising money from those who expect a political return.

So not only are prospective independent candidates blown off the park by the big fund raising of major parties, and ticket voting at local state and federal polls, the privileges of office are continually increased to support incumbents along with a system of allowances – code for lurks and perks- that unfairly advantages all MPs if they choose to exploit it.

In 2004 \$95 million was spent on so-called government advertising in the lead-up to the election. From July this year the figure is already about \$80 million. Political propaganda sustained by the taxpayers.

To what degree does such largesse from incumbent governments influence the behaviour of media in their coverage of politics. Since the Howard government took office in 1996 almost a billion dollars - \$980 million- has been spent on federal government advertising. Such spending –along with that of state governments (which is over \$2 billion for the same period) - constitutes a significant income for media organisations, especially television and print. Add to that a likely relaxation of cross media laws and its easy to see why the media moguls and many of their key correspondents are all for the political status quo- especially when it coughs up the cash and the policies.

How often have we heard any criticisms of government advertising spending on commercial radio and television programs?

Clerk of the Senate Harry Evans, an essential burr under the propaganda blanket of government, says in his submission to the Senate Finance Committees inquiry into Government advertising.

“It is suspected that advertising firms accept lower fees for advertisements paid for by the party in power with an assurance that more lucrative government advertising contracts will fall their way. In effect the expenditure on the government advertising projects subsidises the party-political advertising of the government party. This is tantamount to corruption”

At local, state and federal government level there is a gradual erosion of democratic processes and increasing executive rule. Federally we have Orwellian propaganda units such as the Ministerial Committee on Government Communications with no accountability to parliament.

Even the parliamentary committee process is largely powerless, with government contempt for the findings of most inquiries except where partisan recommendations might reinforce executive policy...and so it goes.

And further undermining our right to have a say about all this are plans for four year federal terms...not fixed as they should be...but simply extending the maximum length of a term to shore up the foundations of the party system which, if tested by proportional representation, would see its parliamentary numbers dramatically reduced.

Finally, just to make sure it further cements its minority rule, for that's what it is, this government wants to close the rolls as soon as an election is called – denying tens of thousands the right to vote - but also to ban prisoners from voting, and there are strong moves within its ranks introduce voluntary voting.

This is the agenda – selective democracy, not representative democracy.