

Submission by Chek Ling

on Electoral Reform Donations, Funding and Expenditure

Summary:

Cap campaign expenditure to 1987 level, roughly 50% of current levels. Funding by the treasury only. Donations, capped, from individual citizens only. Donations not to be used for election campaigns.

This approach is to be buttressed by fixed term Parliament of 4 years; the tenure of PMs limited to 8 years; an independent public service; a cooling period of 2 to 5 years for ex-MPs and ex-senior public servants seeking employment in corporations of interest.

An independent Electoral Scrutineering Body (ESB) to oversee the observance of the strategy designed to achieve the Vision for an enlightened political culture.

1. Vision

A political culture that empathizes* with the common people, and cherishes honour, integrity and forward-lookingness.

And one that is inoculated with self-renewing resistance against corruption, the entrenchment of whoever is in power, the sinecuring of Party apparatchiks as MPs or directors of government owned corporations, and the insidious purchase of MPs as unwitting sleepers, through long term financial and other forms of patronage, by organized self-interest groups.

* as distinct from exploiting their weaknesses and manipulating their prejudices, for electoral advantage.

2. Objectives

To engender a political culture, including that of political parties, that is beyond reproach in following the spirit of democracy**, and in its pursuit of self-renewal.

To achieve integrity in public life: for MPs and ex-MPs; for the internal operations of political parties; and for senior public servants especially.

To remove and emasculate the sources of and structural weaknesses for corruptive influences. For instance: wooing of ethnic votes; chardonaying with developers; receiving alms quietly from bosses of dubious enterprises, say, a gambling stranglehold or a price-fixing national duopoly.

** At present too many MPs come through the nursery of political factions. Many do not have work-life experience outside their faction and Party system. The consequent cloning and incestuous breeding debase the principle of democratic representation in our Parliaments. The populace is thus sold short.

The practical realization of these objectives will be very much helped by:

- fixed term Parliaments of 4 years

To take away, to some extent at least, the perpetual campaigning, especially by the governing Party, hoisted upon the populace at our cost, but often for the private gains of the governing Party, their cronies and their party benefactors who are often self-serving interest groups.

- Maximum tenure for a PM – equivalent to 2 full terms.

Succession planning will become natural. This will reduce the constancy of in-fighting and destabilisation – detracting from good governance.

Power corrupts. This structural provision will reduce the incidence of an ageing PM purging most contenders and leaving his Party in turmoil when he gets voted out. It reduces the cloning effect of the Dear Leader, and makes for a better opposition once a PM should lose an election. A healthy Opposition will mean a more robust democracy, and lesser instances of undeserved entrenchment of a dear leader or his Party.

- Independent public service.

Government tendencies to politicize the public service should be counterbalanced by the delegated power of an Electoral Scrutineering Body (ESB).

- The cleaning up of the lobby industry.

Ex MPs, and senior bureaucrats to be banned for 2 to 5 years from taking up employment in firms which would use them as “insiders” and “conduits” when dealing with the government of the day, or worse still which in effect would be rendering payola for services already rendered before they left the Parliament or the public service.

To this end all employment of ex-MPs and senior bureaucrats must be cleared by the aforementioned independent body for electoral probity after the cooling period. This would reduce the practice of firms attempting to corrupt Ministers through donations and other means while in office and through payola once out of office.

This measure also would have a salubrious effect on the quality of would-be MPs.

3. Strategy

The following formulations on Expenditure, Funding and Donations are made with the entire Vision of an elevated political culture in mind.

Campaign Expenditure

Cap expenditure to before the hike in the last few elections. Say to that of 1987 or about 50% of 2007 election expenditure.

Criminal sanctions for contrived expenditures through arrangements to evade this provision. (Legislation should be such that we do not end up with another tax-avoidance look-alike industry. The ESB should be empowered to adopt an “inquisitorial” rather than the primitive “adversarial” approach in the discharge of its mandated duties, to achieve timely, efficient and effective outcomes.)

Government “information advertisements” before elections to be vetted by the ESB.

Reasons:

A sharp drop in campaign expenditure will provide the necessary impetus for change in our political culture. The stipulated level was sufficient in the past. (1987 was not a bad

year.) And this measure will make the huge donations from non-individuals unnecessary, and exclusive funding by the treasury within the realms of sensibleness. It will make campaigns more germane to the real differences between contestants and reduce the undignifying noises of the soap & celeb culture in campaigns. The felt financial scarcity will create serious, genuine and unadulterated communication from the Parties, and eventually will lead to informed and reasoned conversations amongst the populace about the affairs of our nation – an enlightened democracy!

Funding

By the treasury only.

Reasons:

This will lead to a more level playing field that cannot be upset by corporate or individual donations or other means, within or outside Australia, provided that the ESB is given a full set of teeth.

MPs can stick to their knitting and cease to develop a sucking-up-to-all-and-sundry antennae for donations, thus removing this tumour on the face of our political culture.

The might of the Party machine will be reigned in, where the will persists, making for a less forbidding climate for non-Party apparatchiks to gain selection for Parliament. (For instance, one overseas-born Chinese-Australian MP won the nod from his Party for pre-selection, against a fellow Chinese candidate, by demonstrating his superior capacity in rising to his party power-broker's demand to buy 20 tables for a party fund-raiser at a Chinese restaurant.)

MPs will not become unwitting sleepers for special interest lobbies with deep pockets, entrenched interests, and enduringly innocent-looking cordiality.

Greater maturity of our political culture will follow with the decline of the costly pop and celeb culture in our campaigns, for instance the Unlock My Chains ads. (And election campaigns will avoid degenerating into a puppet show by the contesting parties, funded by the same donors to safeguard their hold on the MPs and their party's power-brokers.)

It would reduce the size and grasp of the “voter research” and spin industry. This would keep government eyes on the ball, with less distractions and interest peddling from the spin industry.

And hopefully I will not continue to receive “individualized” letters from annointed candidates, and sometimes from their colleagues in a higher realm, in tandem – the Minister, the PM even, or letters in Chinese (with my name in English!), or to get asked to be herded to one Chinese restaurant function or another by this Chinaman comprador or that to honour and pay dues to one politician or another that is said by the comprador to “have been good to us.” (This would also redress a running sore on the torso of “multiculturalism”.)

Donations

Capped, to \$1000, per citizen per Party.

The rich, however they got there, should not be let loose to buy influence. In an increasingly winner-take-all society the temptation is just too great.

From individual citizens only.

Method of donating to be defined and made transparent.

Severe criminal sanctions against subterfuge, in intent, is essential.

For community project use only.

Donations to be used for community projects which distinguish one Party from the other in their fundamental approach to making our society better. (This in part addresses the issue of one's democratic right to donate to one's Party.)

For example:

- ALP: a project for homeless people in a particular suburb – from sleeping in the streets to being in a job. Such a project could be a grass-root pilot project for a national policy. (fine-tuning the economic structure to provide access for the down and out – Centrelink notwithstanding.)
- LNP: a carefully crafted volunteer group to help small businesses in a particular electorate, say, to lay down foundations for a sustainable future (to redress high failure rates of small business); or to help young people to learn to be financially self-reliant and inoculated against the ravages of the free market – the conferring of multiple credit cards; the small print in mobile phone contracts, to name just two mundane examples.

Reasons:

In time donors would feel that they are doing something real and close to home and hearth; that politics can happen at grass root levels for the benefit of society and not just the candidates for political office and their cronies, as it sometimes occurs at present.

This would redefine the philosophical building blocks of our political culture: in the fullness of time, trying to win by whatever means will be deemed not honourable; it would be more honourable for a political party (to use donations) to take on community projects which would exemplify the dignity and integrity of the values and philosophical underpinnings of a Party. Hence only individual donations, lest a pharmaceutical company should donate the full cost of a project to manage the happiness index of everyone in a down and out suburb, through the trial of their latest happiness drug, with expense-paid inspection tours for the project managers to Paris, London and New York.

This approach will remove the corruptive influence of donations to MPs and the coercive effect of the “sleeper syndrome” upon one Party or both major Parties, in Parliament.

Funding of think tanks for spreading misinformation, tribal war propaganda, and such undemocratic endeavours should be overseen by the aforementioned independent body, under the provisions of the Cap on Electoral Expenditure.

Finally this new undertaking will have a snowballing effect in elevating our political culture. There is some room for this to happen yet.

For instance, in the crude nationalism that now surrounds the use of our flag, possibly the residual effect of the then PM's national security machinations that followed the appearance of the M V Tampa on our maritime border in 2001, with asylum seekers it had rescued at sea.

As well, in the Australia Day just past, fights amongst youths, and the trashing of ethnic businesses by youths, along a sizeable stretch of our eastern shoreline, appeared to have been connected with the over-zealous and simplistic appropriation of our flag and/or our national identity. For the first time, this year, I was greeted with "Happy Australia Day" in my regular evening walk in a large riverside park, from innocent-looking flag-bearing youths, a little overconfident for total strangers, proffering their alcohol-infused incantations.

And regrettably, there is the photograph of young Aussie women, in The Australian dated 10/02/2009, in various Australian-flag adorned beach wear in Bali. Is it plain crudity, to say that we aussies are back and all is forgiven? Or more lamentably that we will prevail: the orient is for us to savour, its exoticness, its poverty-driven hospitality, a hark-back to the colonial days of old?

At home and abroad, there is room for our political culture to be elevated in a number of directions. This is the ultimate challenge - before the cancerous growth of ever-escalating campaign expenditures, funded by more and more dubious means, becomes so embedded in our whole society that corruption becomes an endemic part of Australian life.

It would be ironic for us to slide down that slippery slope, just when neighbours like Indonesia are trying hard to climb out of that political and cultural malaise. For them they could point, with justification, to the legacy of their colonizers in centuries past; for us we would only have our own selective blindness to blame.

Concluding remarks

Can't be done! Can't be done!!
We have to carry the people with us.
It's too stark.
And constitutionally not possible.
Blah ...

To lead is to take courage in both hands, once the Vision is clear. As has been said, where there is a will there is a way.

And with apologies to William Blake:
To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

Let not our imagination remain timid.