

Comments on the Electoral Reform Green Paper on “Donations, Funding and Expenditure

Comments from the Electoral Reform Society of South Australia, February 2009.

The Electoral Reform Society of South Australia proposes the following:

- **Remove the 4% limit**
- **Pay only for legitimate expenses incurred**
- **Provide equal access to free media time**
- **Donations by individuals to be tax deductible**
- **Revamp the guide to Federal elections and produce one for each Federal electorate with details on polling places, candidates and ticket voting.**

The Electoral Reform Society has some concerns with the current method of allocating public electoral funding.

Remove the 4% limit

The Society is opposed to the arbitrary requirement of 4% of the vote before being eligible for funding. This is a kin to saying that the vote of anyone who supports a minor candidature is irrelevant. The monetary value of **all** votes should be the same, regardless of who gets the votes.

Pay only for legitimate expenses incurred

Before any funding is given to a political party or a candidate, evidence needs to be provided on the actual legitimate expenses incurred and no funding should be provided in excess of this expenditure. Political parties and candidates should not be allowed to make a financial windfall from contesting elections.

Provide equal access to free media time

If Australia's elections are going to be free and fair it is essential that **all** candidates are treated equally in all aspects including access to and payment from any public electoral funding. There also needs to be equal access to any 'free time' provided in the media (including the ABC and print media).

Donations by individuals to be tax deductible

All voters also needed to be treated equally. Not only should the monetary value of all votes be the same, but all voters should be able to claim any donations they make as tax deductions. If we are serious in encouraging participation in the political process, perhaps this should be encouraged through the taxation system rather than automatic payments of public electoral funding. However to ensure that the influence brought by such donations does not undermine democratic principles, there should be a cap of donations and any threshold on public disclosure of these donations should be low (perhaps \$1000). As it is only individuals who can vote in elections for the Australian Parliament, it should only be individuals who receive any tax deductibility.

Revamp the guide to Federal elections and produce one for each Federal electorate with details on polling places, candidates and ticket voting.

The AEC publication “Your official guide to the 2007 federal election” was virtually useless with no specific details provided. In addition, it appears that not everyone received a copy.

The Society was disappointed in this publication. Even the more general information was limited. For example, the booklet “*Election 2004*” produced and distributed before the 2004 Federal Election had correctly stated that in relation to above the line voting for the Senate, “*information will be available at all polling places showing you how each party or group has decided to allocated preferences*”. Why was this excluded from the 2007 publication?

The Society would like to see such a publication produced for each Federal electorate.

1) It needs to include the location of the polling booths. This would assist particularly where polling places have changed since the last Federal election or where there are different polling places in a neighbourhood for Federal and State elections, and there is confusion about the polling booth and what facilities are available (such as wheel chair access). Referring people to a daily paper is not appropriate, and this becomes less relevant as circulation declines.

2) In this publication, there needs to be a list of all candidates for the House of Representatives electorate and for the Senate in that State. Nowadays it is possible not to even know all the candidates for a House of Representatives electorate as not all candidates circulate electoral material, and yet voters are being forced to mark preferences for these.

The situation is even more complicated for the Senate with more candidates, and above and below the line voting. For those wanting to vote above the line, details on voting tickets should be provided in the official guide.

3) Ideally the Society would like to see this publication also with details about all candidates, such as a brief description, perhaps a photo and contact details (essential). If Australia is serious in encouraging participation in the political process now is the time to provide more details so that **all** electors can make informed decisions.

Conclusion

In the Electoral Reform Green Paper a list of principles are given at the start of Chapter 2. The principle that is missing is **equality** – **all** voters must be treated equally and **all** candidates must be treated equally. Until this happens, Australia’s electoral processes will be questioned and found wanting.