

**GRIEVANCE DEBATE: Democracy**

**Mr ANDREN** (Calare) (4.56 p.m.)—*Today I am grieving for the state of democracy in this country.* Hopefully the result in the Pittwater by-election at the weekend is a healthy sign that voters are rejecting major party arrogance, whether it is in the form of industrial relations changes with absolutely no mandate or in the form of party candidates being imposed on electorates from the outside. We must never assume, as some may try to 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 members of parliament in debating, amending and overseeing laws. The role of legislators is being usurped by executive federal government and its extraparliamentary body, the Council of Australian Governments. The current farce of an informed debate and inquiry into counter-terrorism laws stands in stark contrast to the United Kingdom. There, the three major terrorism laws prior to 2004 are reviewed annually by independent reviewer Lord Carlile, while the latest 2005 law is subject to a three-monthly report on control orders from the Home Secretary as well as Lord Carlile's annual review. In Australia there will be no independent review. Will the government accept the inquiry recommendations being outlined as I speak?

COAG has become a de facto governing council. When Australian Capital Territory Chief Minister, Jon Stanhope, chose to let the people know about the draft counter-terrorism bill, he was pilloried for making it available on his web site. Stanhope's actions led to the public debate we were not supposed to have. It forced an extension—pitifully short as it has been—of 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 such as the terror laws.

Here in this winner-take-all democracy, crucial public policy issues—for example, the IR reforms, the sale of Telstra and the security legislation—have had totally inadequate scrutiny, truncated inquiry and truncated debate. There are no House legislation reference committees. We—or at least those of us who might be interested in being anything other than a number in the division—pathetically wait here for the outcome of Senate inquiries. How many times have we debated bills before even a draft *BillsDigest*, let alone any inquiry outcomes, was available? 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 former Prime Minister 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 preference deals. Such representation will not, unfortunately, be achieved in the people's house. That cannot happen until we have proportional representation in this place, too. An overwhelming number of Western democracies—apart from the UK, Canada, the USA and Australia; all relics of outdated and irrelevant Westminsterism—have a form of proportional representation. Despite those who would try and discredit proportional representation, the truth is that first-past-the-post and majoritarian preferential voting deliver far less democratic outcomes than proportional representation.

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 and even consensus. They are strange words, I know, for this government and the major political parties, but it is exactly what people expect. Alliances, consensus and negotiation are the cornerstones of modern democracies. Look at what is happening in Israel, in Germany and in New Zealand. The electorate can engage on an issue-by-issue basis—as it yearns to do now in Australia on the industrial relations legislation, which was rammed through with no mandate; on the privatisation of Telstra, in the face of overwhelming opposition; on the antiterror legislation; and no doubt on 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. An amount of \$55 million of public money was squandered on an IR propaganda campaign. There were 11,000 television spots bought by the government in October and \$26 million—on top of the \$55 million IR blitz—was spent by the government on advertising across all media in October. That is government by spin, government by media event and government by deceit. And the tap is not turned off for elections, as it should be, with parties using their own resources. It is opened even wider, with flagrant abuse of the so-called conventions applying to the use of staff and overtime, printing allowances, cars, phones, air travel, electorate offices and so it goes.

Now there are plans to lift the disclosure limit for donations to major parties to \$5,000, parties who already share around \$40 million, at the last dip, of public funding. The Australian 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 ALP's Progressive Business or the Prime Minister's Millennium Forum with price tags up to \$20,000.

At a local government level, there is the sad tale of the corrupted Tweed council, sacked after some pseudoindependent 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 have suggested that \$50,000 per candidate, properly audited and reported by each candidate—not the party—is the only way to go; otherwise, we will be the second-best democracy after the US that money can buy. Congressional candidates there require \$750,000 every two years, raising money from those who expect a political return for their investment.

So not only are prospective independent candidates blown off the park by the big fundraising of major parties and ticket voting at local, state and federal polls but the privileges of office are continually increased to support incumbents, along with a system of allowances—code for lurks and perks—that unfairly advantage 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, that 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, \$980 million—almost \$1 billion—has been spent on federal government advertising. Such spending, along with that of the state governments—over \$2 billion for the same period—constitutes a significant income for media organisations, especially print and television. Add to that a likely relaxation of cross-media laws and it is easy to see why the media moguls and many of their correspondents are all for the political status quo, especially when it coughs up the cash and the policies. How often have we heard any criticism of government advertising spending on commercial radio and television? Clerk of the Senate, Harry Evans—an essential burr under the propaganda blanket of government—in his submission to the Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee inquiry into government advertising, said:

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.

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 foundation of a party system which, if tested by proportional representation, would see its parliamentary numbers dramatically reduced. Finally, just to make sure it further cements minority rule—for that is 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, and also to ban prisoners from voting, and there are strong moves within its ranks to introduce voluntary voting. This is the agenda: selective democracy, not representative democracy.