



“Howard is playing fast and loose with our democracy”

KATE ELLIS SAYS THE GOVERNMENT HAS SLYLY PASSED DANGEROUS NEW LAWS

DO we take our democracy for granted? After this week in Federal Parliament we may be about to find out.

In an extraordinary few days, when perhaps Prime Minister John Howard assumed we were all distracted by the soccer (Go you Socceroos!) he brought in some extraordinary new electoral laws which should be of concern to all Australians, regardless of their political persuasion and policy views.

The Howard Government is manipulating our democracy for its own political gain.

The new laws deliver a double blow to our democracy – effectively making it harder for us to vote and participate in the democratic process, but easier for political parties to receive sizeable secret donations.

It makes a mockery of the notion of transparency which is so important to prevent corruption in our system.

Surely it is important to know who or what may be influencing our politicians and the decisions that they make.

Until these laws, any donations to political parties over \$1500 had to be publicly disclosed. This was a safeguard against corruption and a means of ensuring that the public could see just who their politicians were really representing.

Under the new laws the disclosure threshold has increased massively to \$10,000 and, worse yet, this \$10,000 can be donated to each state and territory branch of a party, meaning a \$90,000 donation remains hidden from public scrutiny.

To put this in perspective, 80 per

cent of donations received by the major parties in 2004/05 were \$10,000 or under, meaning a total of \$25 million could have been hidden from the public view under these laws.

That is a huge amount. Surely the public has a right to know who it came from?

This change implies that political influence is up for sale. It must be absolutely resisted.

I am of the view that the Australian Government should be closing the loopholes that incite corruption – not extending them.

But the insults to our democracy don't stop there because the Federal Government's laws have further powers. They also make it harder for us to vote.

The Government pushed through measures which effectively close the electoral rolls on the day that the election is called, denying thousands of Australians the opportunity to enrol or update their enrolment.

According to the Australian Electoral Commission, in the last federal election 78,000 people enrolled to vote in the seven days after the 2004 election was called and 345,000 updated their details.

That is 78,000 people who under this system would lose their fundamental civil right to vote, and up to 345,000 to vote in the wrong electorate!

The Electoral Commission itself previously stated: “The AEC considers it would be a backward step to repeal the provision which guarantees electors this seven-day period in which to correct their enrolment.”

This seems to be a case of arrogance to the extreme. The Govern-

ment argues that it knows better than the experts. Others argue that it is intentionally seeking to disenfranchise these people – the majority of whom are young voters, which is a demographic not historically supportive of conservative governments.

The Howard Government is hypocritical and confused about its commitment to democracy.

When it needed a new excuse to justify Australia's involvement in the war in Iraq (after its weapons of mass destruction were proven to be imaginary), it jumped on board the democracy bandwagon, justifying the war on the basis of bringing a democratic system to Iraq.

At the same time it is not phased about hacking away at the provisions within our own electoral system that ensure power for the people.

I must confess that I thought twice about writing this column, worried that it may be seen as a “political insiders” issue.

But the issue of our democracy is important to us all. Australia has long been blessed with a well-functioning, fair and stable democratic system. These changes must face public scrutiny.

Our democracy does not belong to the Howard Government. It doesn't belong to any government and nor should it. Our democracy belongs to the people of Australia.

The people of Australia would be right to tell an arrogant government drunk on its own power to put our democracy first.

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