Panel of Experts – Political Donations

Submitted by Ian Hammerton
Burwood Community Voice

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Expert Panel on Political Donations
Parliament of New South Wales
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the investigation for further reforms to election funding laws.

Burwood Community Voice is a local resident group in the Burwood local government area and has participated in the last four Burwood local government elections. Since our formation in 1998, Burwood Community Voice has had representation on Burwood Council. From formation of the group, we have taken a strong stance not to accept donations from developers and corporations and have relied on donations from individual residents. This stance has put us at a disadvantage as most other candidates in the four local government elections we have contested have accepted such donations and so had greater funds to spend on their election campaigns.

We fully support public funding for state and local government election campaigns. As a local residents’ group, we believe the existing private funding of election campaigns is unfair for community groups like ourselves with limited resources and favours the large political parties who can call on resources at a state and federal level.

We believe, however, that public funding will only be successful if there is a new model for how election campaigns are conducted. If public funding of election campaigns consists just of reimbursement for electoral expenditure of candidates, this could be high cost and inequitable.

Burwood Community Voice proposes a model for election campaigns that is equitable to all candidates and more importantly would engage and inform the community in electing their local representatives. The following model is proposed.

- No candidate or political party could independently issue any election campaign material including printed material and advertisements in all media.
- An independent authority, such as the NSW Electoral Commission, would control, manage and issue all election campaign material. For example the authority would issue an ‘election campaign paper’ in every electorate or local government area two to four times during the election campaign. This paper would be delivered to all residents on the electoral rolls. The paper would provide information on all the candidates. The printing and the delivery of the paper would be publicly funded. Candidates and political parties could not independently letterbox drop other campaign material.
• Similarly, a website could be established for each electorate and local government area to display information about each candidate. The candidates would provide the information to be on the website and criteria would apply for the presentation of the material. The website would be publicly funded. The Independent authority would buy and control space in the media (newspapers and television) for candidates and parties to advertise.

• The independent authority would arrange for candidate forums in different locations in each electorate so all residents had easy access to at least one forum. Candidates would have the choice to appear at each forum or not. There would be a set format to the forum, for example each candidate would have five minutes to present himself or herself, there would be a chaired question time and a set time limit. Again this would be publicly funded.

• During the election campaign, the independent election authority would advertise the election and provide locations for the community to pick up election material such as the election paper, a list of polling booths and postal vote information and forms etc.

• Candidates would still be able to doorknock and visit various locations such as shopping centres and train stations. However, they would only be allowed to hand out the ‘election campaign paper’.

• On the Election Day, no signs and posters for candidates would be allowed at polling booths, only signs to clearly identify that it is a polling booth. Candidates or their representatives could hand out approved ‘how to vote’ material for their candidacy or group. Public funding would be provided for all candidates to have ‘how to vote’ material printed. The printing could be organised by each candidate or organised by the independent authority.

This election campaign model has many advantages including:

• It would reduce overall cost of election campaigns and ensure that the public funding is affordable. In this model, the independent authority directly controls the cost of election campaign material.

• There would be greater independent control over the type of election campaign material that would be issued. Inappropriate and misleading information would not be issued as the independent authority controls what is issued.

• It is a fairer way to provide the funding to the candidates and provides little opportunity for any rorting of the funding system.

• It provides equity for all candidates and avoids the inequity of some candidates having substantially more campaign funds than other candidates or large political parties having low costs per election campaign item because of bulk purchasing power. There is an equal opportunity for all candidates to promote themselves to the community.

• It better engages the community in elections. The election campaign paper provides a very convenient way, by using the one source, for the community to find out about all the candidates and compare the candidates. The forums provide the community easy access to meet and question the candidates. The popularity of public forums at recent elections and the popularity of Q&A on
ABC television demonstrate the desire of the community to directly question political candidates.

- The election campaign would be more sustainable. For example the production of one election paper would replace the numerous letterbox election campaign material normally delivered by the candidates. We are sure the community would prefer one paper rather than their letterbox being full of different election campaign pamphlets.

Burwood Community Voice believes that this model is very workable and is a vast improvement on the present way election campaigns are conducted. This model ensures that all voters have the opportunity to be fully informed about each candidate and party before they vote.

In conclusion, Burwood Community Voice supports the public funding of election campaigns. We believe the public funding can be implemented in a way that is affordable and equitable to the candidates. More importantly, it can be implemented in a way that better engages the community in the election of their local representative.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

Ian Hammerton
President,
Burwood Community Voice.