

# Restraining Incumbency

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## AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ACTION PLAN RESTRAINING INCUMBENCY ACCOUNTABILITY

*Any Member or Senator holding a seat benefits from incumbency - even more so if they are in a safe seat, or hold high office. The incumbent has a natural advantage over any challenger when an election is contested. However, when that incumbency advantage is artificially boosted so that it becomes much more expensive or difficult for a challenger to contest the seat, it becomes a real problem. Despite our democratic system being a plural one, in which numbers of political parties and independents can contest elections, there is a strong tendency towards dualism and oligopoly. So incumbency advantages further boost the prospects of the two largest beneficiaries, the Liberal and Labor parties.*

*“ ... increasing amounts of ‘slush’ money to incumbent MPs ... in the form of parliamentary entitlements is tilting election contests unfairly in favour of incumbent MPs, at the expense of democratic equality.”*

**Academic Norm Kelly  
Australian National  
University**

Barriers to entry into politics in Australia are most evident in financial terms – contesting elections is expensive. The Coalition government has increased the taxpayer-funded staffing, communications, and electioneering capacity of sitting members and senators so much that any contestant with less than \$350 000 per seat is at a hopeless disadvantage. This undermines the principle of political equality and is an anti-competitive barrier to entry. At a time when other democracies have imposed constraints on the use of public funds for electoral campaigning, the Howard government has taken every opportunity to boost the incumbent at taxpayers’ expense. Unfortunately Labor will likely retain these changes, having only indicated they will reduce the printing entitlements slightly.

## Our Action Plan

- Campaign to reduce excessive taxpayer funded printing postage and communications allowances for parliamentarians;
- Cap expenditure by candidate per constituency in elections;
- Move to disallow any further increases or changes to parliamentary entitlements and allowances that can be used for political party purposes;
- Ensure triennial audits of parliamentarians functions and offices by the Auditor General, including benchmarking to detect unusual usages of entitlements;
- Ensure annual comprehensive reports on all parliamentarians’ expenditure;
- The Remuneration Tribunal to benchmark the resources parliamentarians need to do their job against relevant international and national standards;
- Campaign to curb the misuse of taxpayer’s money for political advertising (see our Government Advertising Action Plan).



Other ACTION PLANS are available online at  
[www.democrats.org.au](http://www.democrats.org.au)

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## Issue one: use and abuse of political incumbency

Parliamentarians have a wide range of responsibilities – party, political, parliamentary, legislative, representative and portfolio. They do need modern efficient office resources to carry these responsibilities out effectively. However, care must be taken that their office resources are not ahead of reasonable community standards and expectations. Proper independent determination and audit is needed, and reporting and disclosure must be full regular and transparent.

Member or Senator incumbents have an inbuilt advantage over challengers for their seat, unless that challenger is backed by the resources and money of a major party or organisation. Their staffing and office provisions, modern phone, fax and electronic communications, fast franking and risograph machines, colour printers, and advanced computer facilities, all help give them this advantage.

Since 1996 office entitlements have expanded to provide enhanced parking and travel allowances for parliamentarians and their staff, broadband web access, significant computer electronic and mechanical office enhancements, two phone lines, two mobile phones, a digital organiser, and increased subscriptions.

What the Howard Coalition government has done is to radically extend the natural inbuilt advantages of incumbency. Most obscene of all has been the misuse of government advertising to advantage the incumbent government, and a huge increase in the number of ministerial staffers and members of the secretive 'government members secretariat'. At the individual parliamentary level they have lifted staff numbers per parliamentarian from 3 to 4, and doubled the relief staff provision, neither of which resulted from thorough independent publicly available assessments of whether MPs work demands warranted it.

They have hugely increased printing and postage allowances, and allowed those allowances to be used for purposes never contemplated before. How-to-vote cards used to be at the cost of a political party – they can now be funded by taxpayers. The public purse is funding transport and telecommunication costs, mail and printing costs, running websites, maintaining electoral databases - all trappings of political incumbency worth many millions of dollars in each political cycle.

In 1996 6 large electorates could have a second electorate office and an extra staffer. Now there are 20 electorates. Members serving large constituencies can now aggregate their communications and charter allowances, and money allocated for travel to distant parts of the constituency can now be used for mail. At the time this came through the Leader of the Opposition in the Senate estimated that each of the 33 members in large constituencies could now accumulate, (with other entitlements), a whopping \$393 500 of taxpayer funds for their re-election.

In August 2006, the Howard Government displayed its determination to stay in office by timely amendments to parliamentary entitlement regulations. Although introduced under the guise of 'servicing the electorate', many are clearly about boosting electioneering activity by its incumbent members. Printing entitlements for Members of the House of Representatives increased from \$125,000 to \$150,000. With 150 Members, this entitlement now amounts to \$22.5 million each year. There



### CONTACT US

(03) 9416 1880

Lv 1, 62 Wellington Parade, East Melbourne VIC 3002

[inquiries@democrats.org.au](mailto:inquiries@democrats.org.au)

Authorised by Jack Evans, 5 Poinciana Place, Wanneroo WA 6065  
Printed by Senator Lyn Allison, Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600

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was no such allowance until Labor introduced it in the early 1990s and it has grown ever since. There is also now a provision to carry forward 45% of unused benefits into the following year. This means there is now the potential for Members to access printing entitlements of up to \$217,500 during an election year, which is a grossly unfair advantage to an incumbent over other candidates in an election.

MPs can now use their printing entitlements for postal-vote applications and how-to-vote cards for the member's seat or other seats in their respective state or territory. By comparison, MPs contesting the 1996 election could not use this entitlement for party-based material. Figures released by the Minister indicate printing costs for Government MPs have escalated from \$15,414 in 1996 to \$94,511 in 2006, and Opposition MPs from \$18,357 to \$71,848. On the other hand, independent MPs printing costs rose to only \$35,214 over the same period.

Since 2004 sitting Members and Senators have been able to use their postal, printing and communications allowances for election campaigns. Members can spend them in those parts of adjoining seats subject to redistribution. Senators can divert their allowances to help party colleagues. In sum, while the advantage of public-funded expenses goes to all sitting MPs, that advantage compounds for a government where its electoral ascendancy is most pronounced.

## Issue two: not a level playing field

Given that taxpayer money is now heavily used to fund election campaigns, questions certainly arise as to whether there is an unethical use of incumbency to further political party interests. For major parties, particularly in government, the advantage gained from a war-chest of entitlements, private political donations, (which overwhelmingly benefit the two major parties), and the saturating use of government advertising in pre-election periods, makes it extremely difficult for minor parties and independents to achieve electoral success.

Not only are minor parties and independents unable to raise equivalent funds privately to compete, they also have to overcome a media predisposition to the incumbents. With so much money at their disposal, incumbent MPs have a distinct and unfair advantage against candidates attempting to unseat them.

The major parties have always had an advantage over minor parties arising from economies of scale and the nature of politics. That will not change. What should change are rules and allowances which unfairly and unjustly create barriers to entry into political contests, and particularly, which allow for the public purse to be used for private political party purposes.

The Democrats support entitlements for MPs to enable them to do their job effectively, but we strongly support them being capped at a much lower figure. The solution to the abuse of incumbency is to reduce and restrain the entitlements of office; to provide for full transparent annual reporting on office use and entitlements; and to have regular audits. In other democracies there are strict controls over parliamentarians' and government expenditure, particularly in elections. This should also happen in Australia.



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