

Government Advertising

AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ACTION PLAN
GOVERNMENT ADVERTISING
ELECTORAL MATTERS & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

The Democrats support information and advertising designed to inform Australians of taxpayer-funded government programs and services. However, we oppose the abuse of budgetary discretion by governments to put out party political propaganda under the guise of legitimate government advertising. Since the 1980s, we have campaigned hard to rein in this form of spending essentially designed to skew the playing field of electoral competition. In October 2003, a Senate Order jointly moved by the Democrats and Labor, which was based on Committee and the Australian National Audit Office recommendations, was to enforce much higher standards and tougher controls on government advertising. However, it has been consistently ignored by the Howard Coalition Government.

“The unfettered right of government to spend taxpayers’ money on party political advertising campaigns must be curtailed. It is nothing less than fiscal irresponsibility.”

Senator Andrew Murray
Spokesperson on
Electoral Matters & Public
Administration

Our Action Plan

- Support the enforcement of the 2003 Senate Order on advertising and the 2005 Senate Committee recommendations
- Pursue at every opportunity through private senator’s bills, parliamentary debate, media work and Senate Committees to establish tougher controls on government advertising.
- Consider seeking political support to help place a cap on government advertising by amending appropriate legislation.

Government Advertising a Threat to Democracy

All governments take advantage of incumbency. However, the use of taxpayer funds to promote party political ideology has escalated to such an extent that it now represents a major issue for our democracy. Concern lies not just with the size of the campaigns, but with their timing, tenor and selectivity.

Between 1990 and 1996 (the last five years of the Labor Government) government advertising ran at an annual rate of up to \$52 million. This rate has more than doubled in the years since the Howard Government took power. One advertising campaign alone in 2005 saw the Government outlaying \$55 million to promote the new workplace relations changes under WorkChoices, an amount that dwarfs public funding payments for elections. This advertising campaign was widely condemned both in scope and intention as it involved selling a policy in advance of being considered by parliament.

Government advertising campaigns also tend to spike in election years. For instance, in the election years 2000-01 and 2003-04, advertising under the Howard Government reached \$156 million and \$143 million respectively. In the interests of our democracy, public monies should not be used as political armoury.



Other ACTION PLANS are available online at
www.democrats.org.au

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Additionally, for the financial year 2005-06, Nielsen Media research listed the Howard Government as the second highest advertiser in Australia behind Coles/Myer, comprising Myer stores, Coles Supermarkets, Kmart, Target and Officeworks. Overall, it is estimated that over the life of the Howard Government up to mid-2007, a colossal \$1.7billion of public funds will have been spent on government advertising and up to \$2 billion by year-end.

Government Advertising Regulation

There are few laws or regulations governing government advertising. The *Commonwealth Electoral Act* provides limited annual reporting requirements, and the use of authorisation tags for printing and publishing. In the absence of legal requirements, the Government Communications Unit used the out-of-date *Guidelines on Australian Government Information Activities: principles and procedures* promulgated in February 1995 as a checking framework for issues concerning government information activities.

There have been some private members' or senators' bills tabled, but these have been unsuccessful to date and include Senator Murray's The Charter of Political Honesty Bill 2000, revised and incorporated into the Electoral (Greater Fairness of Electoral Processes) Amendment Bill 2007, which proposes that only advertising campaigns with bi-partisan approval be allowed in the last six months of a parliament.

The Democrat's initiated Senate order states that all details of each advertising or public information project must be tabled in the Senate, including its purpose and nature, its cost, who authorised it, if it is to be carried out under tender or by contract. Disgracefully, the Government has continued to defy this order.

Senate Inquiry into Government Advertising

In November 2004, the Senate established an inquiry to focus specifically on the scope of and existing controls on Commonwealth government advertising. A report of this inquiry was tabled in December 2005 and included recommendations to establish more robust guidelines, including:

- that before an advertising campaign is initiated, legislation must be passed through the parliament to authorise its implementation; of the policy, program or service being advertised;
- that campaigns valued at \$250,000 or more be submitted to the Auditor General and that the Auditor General should have an overall supervisory role; and
- that Australia follow the Canadian system of publishing a whole-of-government annual report on government advertising to improve public and parliamentary scrutiny of spending.

The Coalition Government with its parliamentary dominance would not implement these recommendations on the spurious grounds that a case for increased scrutiny of advertising had not been sufficiently made to warrant the establishment of an independent oversight body. In the interests of probity and political equality, it is high time that these recommendations were implemented.



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