



AUSTRALIAN  
REGIONAL MEDIA

Review Committee  
Independent Parliamentary Entitlements System  
PO Box 650  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

21<sup>st</sup> October 2015

Dear Sir/Madam

We write to submit to the Review Committee developing options for an Independent Parliamentary Entitlements System.

We represent Australian Regional Media, a company operating newspapers and websites across Queensland and northern New South Wales. Our 12 daily and more than 60 non-daily titles have an audience in excess of two million a week.

Our submission focusses on one issue to demonstrate the need for the change the committee is looking at. The committee seeks to "reduce ambiguity in what constitutes official business". Nothing could better illustrate this problem than our investigation into the use of the printing and communications entitlement during election campaign periods.

Canberra-based reporter Daniel Burdon spent three months delving through all public claims returns from members and senators on the Department of Finance website, examining the period from July 2009 to December 2014 and how they spent their printing and communications entitlement. His investigation has shown that of the \$112 million members and senators claimed on the entitlement between 2009 and 2014, 17% – or \$19 million – was spent during the two six-week election campaign periods in 2010 and 2013. In the regional areas we cover, the MPs we investigated spent between 60% and, incredibly, 100% of their six-monthly entitlement during the six-week campaign periods of those election years.

Intolerably, none of the MPs we have tried to interview have wanted to explain why the huge slant to this spending is needed at this time. It is inconceivable to think anything other than they are using this money as a slush fund to boost their profile at election time, something that gives them a significant and unfair incumbency advantage.

The last independent review of the entitlements system, led by former public servant Barbara Belcher, reporting in 2010, recommended that the use of the printing and communications entitlement be banned during election campaign periods. No government has since acted on this recommendation.

Our investigation has revealed that since the Belcher report was given to the Gillard Government, the overall spending on this entitlement has doubled, or almost doubled, compared to the median six-monthly claims between 2009 and 2014, during the past two election campaigns. While the median six-monthly spend across the period July 2009 to December 2014 was \$7.6 million, in the last half of 2010, this reached \$15.1 million,

with \$7.7 million of that spent during the 2010 election campaign. In the last half of 2013, this figure also reached \$16.3 million, with \$11.4 million spent during the 2013 election campaign.

Similarly, the number of parliamentarians gearing their spending on the entitlement towards the election campaign periods more than doubled from the 2010 election to the 2013 election. The number of parliamentarians who spent 90% or more of their six-monthly claims for the last half of an election year during the campaign period grew from 19 politicians at the 2010 election to 44 politicians at the 2013 election.

Further, the number of parliamentarians who spent 70% or more of their six-monthly claims for the last half of an election year during the campaign period more than doubled from 54 at the 2010 election to 135 at the 2013 election campaign.

While the committee's terms of reference do not directly include the use of entitlements during campaign periods, then-Prime Minister Tony Abbott spoke about "community expectations" when launching this inquiry. We submit it is outside of community expectations that elected representatives use this entitlement during campaign periods, especially to such a large degree.

It is clear the committee's stated goal of needing to provide clarity to MPs about their entitlements and how to use them appropriately has never been more needed than in this case. While entitlements spending is publicly reported, the spending on this entitlement lacks transparency, using terms such as "printed items" for a wide variety of documents produced under the entitlement, thus making it difficult to allow proper investigation of whether this money may have been misused.

We include links to several reports from our early coverage of this important story. Please note the top link includes an interactive graphic that shows the spending of every federal parliamentarian from July 2009 to December 2014, including the campaign period spending. This took hours of work to compile, but is stark proof of both the scale and depth of this problem in Australia's federal parliament.

Initial story:

<http://www.sunshinecoastdaily.com.au/news/revealed-mps-19m-election-campaign-loophole/2809529/>

Follow-ups with individual MPs:

<http://www.sunshinecoastdaily.com.au/news/former-pms-among-worst-spenders/2813033/>

<http://www.sunshinecoastdaily.com.au/news/wyatt-roy-spends-big-claiming-540000-office-expens/2811273/>

<http://www.sunshinecoastdaily.com.au/news/peter-slippers-doomed-election-campaign-cost-10600/2811284/>

<http://www.gympietimes.com.au/news/truss-spends-almost-120000-hold-seat/2811296/>

<http://www.warwickdailynews.com.au/news/maranoa-mp-bruce-scott-spends-600000-office-costs/2811263/>

<http://www.qt.com.au/news/blair-mp-shayne-neumann-spent-766497-office-expens/2811222/>

<http://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/ian-macfarlane-spend-660000-office-costs/2811359/>

<http://www.frasercoastchronicle.com.au/news/warren-truss-spent-118718-six-months-during-campai/2811254/>)

<http://www.news-mail.com.au/news/odowd-spent-132000-when-campaigning-re-election/2811259/>)

<http://www.dailymercury.com.au/news/george-christensen-spent-105000-re-election-campai/2811383/>)

<http://www.themorningbulletin.com.au/news/flynn-mp-ken-odowd-claims-132309-office-costs/2811234/>)

<http://www.gladstoneobserver.com.au/news/odowd-spent-132000-when-campaigning-re-election/2811259/>)

<http://www.northernstar.com.au/news/richmond-mp-justine-elliott-spends-660000-office-co/2811331/>)

<http://www.dailyexaminer.com.au/news/luke-hartsuyker-spent-100000-hold-his-seat/2811315/>)

We are happy for our submission to be made public, and would take up the chance to speak to it if offered.

Yours faithfully

**Bryce Johns**  
Editorial Director  
Australian Regional Media