

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO STRENGTHENING GOVERNMENT AND PARLIAMENTARY ACCOUNTABILITY IN VICTORIA

Preamble

As concerned citizens and former teachers with strong professional and personal interest in the political system, we are very concerned about the increasing cynicism and disillusionment towards politicians and the democratic process. This is reflected in student attitudes and in observations made by friends from a wide range of backgrounds and occupations. This dissatisfaction is resulting in a decline in active participation in the political process, which is a key feature of a strong democracy.

We welcome the opportunity given by the Accounts and Estimates Committee to make a submission to the Inquiry Into Strengthening Government and Political Accountability. We are, however, concerned that even this Inquiry will only come to the attention of political organisations. Are voters and citizens meant to be involved in these deliberations? If so, why has there not been wider publicity through the media inviting submissions from the general public? We believe as much emphasis should be placed on promoting democracy as on the achievements of Government.

The terms of reference themselves seem somewhat restricted and fail to deal with several issues we consider central to making Government more open and accountable.

Our specific concerns:

The issues we particularly wish the Inquiry to address are:

1. MINISTERIAL RESPONSIBILITY

We have seen a disturbing trend for ministers to deny responsibility for failings in the department for which they are responsible by claiming that their departmental staff did not inform them of a particular situation or pass on the relevant documents. It should be stipulated that it is the responsibility of ministers to be informed of all important matters and that it is the duty of their staff to bring such matters to their attention. Such accountability is an essential element of good government.

2. MINISTERIAL STAFF

There is at times public disquiet concerning the appointment process, accountability and conduct of ministerial staff. As ministerial staff act on behalf of the minister, similar rules in terms of accountability and responsibility apply. Members of the public are frequently disillusioned by responses to specific requests couched in vague policy terms that do not address the issue. Moreover it is important when attending public or parliamentary inquiries that ministerial staff are empowered and obliged to provide specific and full responses to information requests.

The appointment process of ministerial staff should be transparent and objective to avoid the public perception of cronyism or even corruption. The appointments should be based on expertise rather than political favours or paybacks. Full disclosure of private interests should also be mandatory on appointments to avoid perceptions of conflict of interest.

3. QUESTION TIME

Public confidence will only be restored when question time is used properly to ensure ministerial accountability and give a positive image in the media. The following should be prohibited:

- personal abuse
- lack of specific information provided to questions with notice
- the abuse of Dorothy Dixers

Clearer guidelines are required to reinforce the independent role of the Speaker, regulate conduct and the appointment process of the Speaker.

4. FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

Access to reports and documents which are the basis of cabinet and ministerial decisions is vital to public participation and accountability in a democratic system of government. Currently, individual citizens are deterred from accessing such information by seemingly complicated bureaucratic procedures, excessive delays and costs involved. There is a need to provide a clearer and simpler pathway for individuals, as distinct from larger organisations and political parties.

In order to avoid excessive administrative costs or an abuse of this process, an independent panel or person such as an Ombudsman needs to have the jurisdiction to oversee this process and to review disputes.

Conclusion

We do hope that the outcome of the Inquiry will be the legislating of appropriate measures to address these key issues which, we believe, will go a long way to restoring public confidence and respect for parliamentary processes. The other terms of reference identified for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Inquiry are also relevant areas for reform and we support appropriate action to make practices more efficient, transparent and in conformity with community expectations. We commend Parliament on this initiative and wish it every success in reforming our system of government and making it more accountable.

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