

*Supplementary submission to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee
in relation to the inquiry into Parliamentary responsibility*

My primary submission outlined my concern that the gradual erosion of the concept of Parliamentary and Ministerial responsibility from what was understood as the "Westminster system" to one of political expediency is basically a shift in the culture of the political process. It did not contain suggestions as to what can be done to address this decline.

The trend has become so ingrained in the political process that the electorate has become cynical to the point of acceptance. "So, politicians lie! What's new?"

We can draft and adopt standards of conduct to which politicians are expected to conform but the very fact that we decide that such a course is necessary is an admission that the culture of responsibility as evidenced by the likes of Lord Carrington and Willie Brandt no longer exists. Once the culture disappears, it cannot be resurrected by legislation.

There has to be a pervasive and instinctive response by people as to the proprieties of political conduct. I am sure that people who come to politics bring with them the heritage of their upbringing and the concept that "honesty is the best policy" but we would be burying our head in the sand if we said that this philosophy was alive and well once a person gets into the political process. There is too much evidence of evasion, passing the blame to others or simply denial. This suggests that to some extent, the modern political process is corruptive of standards that would be expected of people in their ordinary lives. Regrettably, this corrupting process is also prominent in commercial and sporting life.

I am uncertain as to what education processes are required of a person entering politics. In my day, Professional conduct was a compulsory subject for lawyers before they could apply for admission to the profession. If politicians are required to undertake a course in the ethics of the politician, then such a course is not having the impact it should. If there is no such requirement of politicians entering the political process, then there should be and it should be a repetitive requirement.

One other issue that I did not raise in my submission was that of the concept of "conflict of interest".

Basically, a conflict of interest arises because of appearance. If a politician has a meeting with a lobbyist for a particular interest when that interest is being considered at the Parliamentary level, irrespective of the integrity of the parties, the appearance is the problem. The approach to government in relation to interests should be formal and documented. To the extent that personal submissions are relevant, they should be conducted in an environment of transparency.

A conflict of interest arises where there is an appearance that a party who must act independently, is seen to have an interest in the outcome. It is not a defence to an accusation of a conflict of interest that the party being accused is a person of great integrity and honesty. People have to act that way and should never put themselves in the position where there is a doubt.

Rather than point the finger at anyone in politics, we can use the example of a previous Director of the AFL who also had an interest in the catering to the Melbourne Cricket Ground and Telstra Dome. The answer to the allegation of Conflict of interest was the he was an honest man.

Politicians cannot be too careful about their conduct. If they say that it is unfair to expect them to abandon friendship once they get into politics, the answer is that there are constraints placed upon people in the various professions. People who are answerable to the public have chosen that public status and it does impose upon them restrictions that might not be applicable to people who pursue a private role in society.

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