



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs

MEDIA ALERT

Issued: 14 December 2009

Chair: Mr Mark Dreyfus QC, MP

A TIME FOR CHANGE

A new parliamentary report has recommended sweeping changes to how Australians are provided information before a referendum.

The Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee's report, *A Time for Change: Yes/No?*, found the written material provided to all electors before a referendum is insufficient, and that a greater range of communication is needed to properly inform the public.

Currently a Yes/No pamphlet with arguments for and against the proposed constitutional change is sent to each voter.

The Committee has made 17 recommendations in this report, with the key recommendation being to establish a Referendum Panel prior to each referendum. The Referendum Panel would be independent of government and would be responsible for developing an overarching communications strategy for the referendum. The Panel would identify what material should be provided so that electors can make an informed vote.

The Chair of the Committee, Mark Dreyfus QC MP, says it is important to modernise how electors are informed given new communications technology.

"We've had Yes/No pamphlets for nearly 100 years, and there have been significant changes in both communication technologies and the needs of voters during that time," Mr Dreyfus said. "We need to address these changes to ensure that information campaigns are effective for all Australians".

"Slogans like 'Don't know? Vote no' rely on ignorance and misinformation – the Government must do everything it can to ensure electors understand proposals to change the Constitution," Mr Dreyfus said.

The Committee also recommended that:

- The Yes/No Pamphlets be retained but should be sent to every household rather than every elector;
- Parliamentarians continue to authorise the Yes and No arguments;
- A national civics education program be developed to improve knowledge of the Constitution.
- The Machinery of Referendums Act provisions be consolidated and harmonised with the Commonwealth Electoral Act.

For interview:

Contact the Committee Chair, Mr Mark Dreyfus QC, MP on (03) 9769 1955, or Mr Dreyfus' media adviser, Tim Lisle-Williams on 0431 178 280.

For background information please visit the inquiry website at www.aph.gov.au/laca or contact the Committee Secretariat on (02) 6277 2358.