



FRIENDS OF THE EARTH

Campaigning on Environmental issues in their social, political and human rights context.

Regional Contact Southern Tablelands NSW
Frank Miller
PO Wingello 2579 ph. and fax: (02) 4884 4427

The Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Madam,

on behalf of Friends of the Earth I wish to comment on the 'Conduct of the 2001 Federal Election', the subject of a public Inquiry by your committee. The comments will be structured under the following heads:

- * Introduction.
- * Advertising campaign prior to election.
- * Election date.
- * Election strategy.
- * Constitutional reform.

Introduction.

Friends of the Earth Australia, a network of 13 groups, is a member of Friends of the Earth International, a federation of 68 independent national environmental groups, uniting close to one million activists worldwide.

FoE is concerned about a wide range of issues from air & water pollution, global warming, toxic wastes, uranium mining, renewable energy, ecologically sustainable forest and land management to human rights and public policies of governments.

The conduct of elections by various Australian governments, and in particular of the 2001 federal election has given grounds for serious concern, and although the majority of electors have agreed with it, wide sections of the electorate could not accept it.

Advertising campaign.

Prior to the announcement of the election date, the federal government

undertook a massive advertising campaign (the chains for instance), which, although not directly part of the impending election campaign, nevertheless promoted the achievements of the coalition government. This campaign, unmistakably targeted at the electorate, was funded by the government; so much so that the repeatedly forecast budget surplus for 2001-02 turned into a deficit.

Recommendation: Elections should be publicly funded. The required funding would become a budget item, open to public scrutiny.

Election date.

It has become the norm (except NSW) for governing parties to determine an election date to a point in time which is electorally advantageous for it; so it was at this election. Recent research indicates that 'unfixed' parliamentary terms have resulted in six unnecessary elections last century at a cost of 800 million to one billion dollars in today's money.

Recommendation:

4-year fixed terms of office and the Parliament with fixed election dates should be introduced urgently to end the manipulation of the election date. Fixed parliamentary terms would promote certainty and stability in the electoral cycle, which would have a positive effect on government planning and decision-making.

Election strategy.

Prior to the 11.September attacks the re-election of the coalition government appeared highly unlikely.and the coalition parties had not enunciated an agenda for the next term of office for which they were seeking reelection. The air attacks were to change this.

The open-ended commitment to the unforeseeable consequences of the US 'war-on-terror' strategy, given by the PM without parliamentary consideration and sanction, reflecting the public shock and horror, turned into a fear complex which became the most potent element of the federal election campaign, reinforced by the hysterical response to the Tampa refugee rescue, the subsequent crude demonisation of the 'asylum seekers', by the trumped up 'breach of the Australian borders', by the 'Pacific Solution' with its undertones of the 'Final Solution' and the great 'children overboard' lie.

Recommendation:

An election result produced by systematically maintained fear, misinformation and lies, the politicalisation of the Public Service and the Military is a denial of genuine democracy, and steps need to be taken to prevent the manipulation of the electorate at this scale in the future.

Constitutional reform.

These events have produced a historically unparalleled situation for Australia; all the more so as the federal opposition has virtually collapsed. A Constitutional Convention should be convened, addressing all matters related to the operation of the Federal government and Parliament and the electoral system, all Delegates to be elected. Some of the issues to be examined and critically considered would comprise the following:

- * The constitutional powers of the PM and of the Executive Government in respect of external affairs, defence and finance,
- * 4-year fixed terms for government and the Parliament,
- * Elections to be publicly funded. 'Donations' by corporations and 'think-tanks' to be unlawful.
- * Campaign budgets open to public scrutiny. Campaigns limited to factually informing citizens of the proposed agendas of the contestants.
- * Transparent election commitments, announced 3 months prior to election date.
- * Election proposals freely available in locations accessible to all citizens (incl.disabled), serialized in the print media and on the Internet; information presented clearly, truthfully and free of jargon.
- * Free air time on radio and TV channels (incl.commercials) available to all endorsed candidates.
- * Proportional representation to replace preferential voting system.

The Convention should be preceded by an extensive and properly resourced consultation process in which responses to the above matters would be actively sought from the community to maximise the ability of citizens to participate in the processes of democratic change.

For the Earth!

 11.6.02

(Frank Miller)

Friends of the Earth
Southern Tablelands NSW.