



# Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Government Advertising and Accountability

## Information vs Propaganda

It is a Government's responsibility to keep its constituents informed. The distribution of information to the community is a worthwhile use of public money. Indeed I would consider a Government that failed to keep its constituents informed to be at best behind the times and at most negligent.

However this being said a distinction must be drawn between information and propaganda. As John Howard said in 1995 "There is clearly a massive difference between necessary Government information for the community and blatant Government electoral propaganda. Propaganda should be paid for by political parties."<sup>1</sup> The difference is that necessary Government information conveys facts, whereas propaganda is, to once more quote the Prime Minister in 1995 "Just a glossy pat on the back" based upon opinion.

A good example of an information campaign is the "Super Choice" campaign run by the Howard Government earlier this year. This campaign dealt almost exclusively with facts and did not selectively use facts to give the impression that any particular superannuation fund was superior to another.

Take for example the section of the Superchoices website dealing with advice to employees.

"Some funds may not offer insurance, or you may have to pass a medical examination or undergo a waiting period before they will cover you. There may also be restrictions for age, dangerous jobs, part-time or casual work, and maternity leave. Some funds make some insurance cover compulsory. Some allow you to opt out and not be charged, while others allow you to opt in.

Decide how much insurance you want and compare the costs. These can vary significantly between different superannuation funds."<sup>2</sup>

What we have here is a simple statement of fact advising employees as to what superannuation funds may or may not cover.

## WorkChoices: What not to do

The Howard Government's WorkChoices campaign, on the other hand, offers us an example of two of the chief vices of propaganda. For one thing, it deals extensively in opinion. Not only that but these opinions are stated as though they are facts. The recently circulated WorkChoices booklet offers numerous examples of this. Page 5 of the booklet alone states that "By encouraging people to work together and by continuing the improvement in our workplaces, WorkChoices will also help continue the improvement in our living standards and quality of life"<sup>3</sup>. This is not a fact in the way that "There may

also be restrictions for age, dangerous jobs, part-time or casual work, and maternity leave” is a fact but an opinion.

It is, of course, impossible to completely remove opinion from Government advertising. Defence Force recruitment advertisements, for example, convey the opinion that joining the Defence Forces is a positive course of action, at least for some.

However there are two important differences between this opinion and that conveyed by the WorkChoices campaign. The first is that the opinion that it is in some peoples best interest to join the Defence Force offers no particular partisan advantage to either side of politics, whereas the opinion that Industrial Relations reform would “continue the improvement in our living standards and quality of life” clearly offers a partisan advantage to the Liberal Party, which supports such reforms.

This brings us to the second distinction. The opinion conveyed in the Defence Force advertisements is not terribly contentious. The opinion put forward by WorkChoices, on the other hand, are highly contentious and rejected by many people and groups.

I put it to the committee that an information campaign should not include contentious opinions, and that the inclusion of opinion in information campaigns amounts to the disguising of such opinions as fact.

The second vice I speak of relates to the sheer quantity of advertising that is often involved in propaganda campaigns. The exact cost of the WorkChoices campaign seems to be uncertain. It has been reported, at the time of writing to be \$45 million<sup>4</sup> and \$55 million<sup>5</sup> and other figures have also been mentioned since the campaign began.

The question of just how much the advertising cost, however, is purely academic, at least as far as this submission is concern. The bombarding the community has been subject to since the beginning of the WorkChoices campaign has simply been gratuitous. Many people have found the advertisements in question to be intensely irritating, uninformative and even insulting. I number among them.

It is the job of Governments to inform their constituents, not to irritate them.

### Politicised Government Advertising

One of the most disturbing aspects of the WorkChoices campaign has been the justification of its existence advanced by some Ministers. Several of these people have staved off criticisms of the WorkChoices campaign by claiming that its purpose was to negate the anti Industrial Relations reform advertising campaign embarked on by the ACTU. Senator Nick Minchin, for example, has said “factual campaigns are only necessary in the face of lies from the Trade Union Movement”<sup>6</sup>.

It is quite impossible for an advertising campaign refuting a political advertising campaign to be anything but political and as the ACTU campaign is an undeniably

political one, attacking a Government policy, Senator Minchin has, by his own words, confirmed that WorkChoices is a political campaign.

### Reforming Government Advertising

While I do not seek to hide, and indeed I have made clear, the contempt in which I hold the WorkChoices campaign the aim of this submission is not to denounce WorkChoices, but to hold it up as an exemplar of the problems with Government advertising.

As a solution, I would suggest that an independent oversight body be established, comprising experts in the fields of advertising as well as in other relevant fields such as ethics and that all proposed Government advertising campaigns be required to meet this bodies approval before being implemented.

I put it to the committee such a body should be charged with ensuring that Government advertising does not

- Articulate any highly contentious opinions, in particular when such opinions, if adopted by the public, would lead to an environment favourable to one political party over another
- Articulate facts in a manner that is deceptive or mendacious
- Result in the expenditure of an amount of money or purchase an amount of air-time or newspaper space which is deemed to be gratuitous

Chris Monnox, 17  
34 Immarna Ave  
Mt Kiera, NSW  
2500

42280877

ssspt@optusnet.com

---

<sup>1</sup> *Aren't There Any Rules?*, Media Watch, ABC, 28<sup>th</sup> June 2004

<sup>2</sup> *Comparing Superannuation Funds*, Superchoice.gov.au, 2005

<sup>3</sup> *WorkChoices*, Australian Government, 2005

<sup>4</sup> Matt Price, *They're off- The Ads, Not the Terror Laws*, Australian, 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2005

<sup>5</sup> Alan Ramsey, *Relaxed and Comfortable- Just Like 1893*, Sydney Morning Herald, 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2005

<sup>6</sup> *Minchin, Tanner Discuss the Telstra Issue*, Lateline, ABC, 12<sup>th</sup> August 2005