

ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Motion

Resumed from an earlier stage.

HON J.A. COWDELL (South West) [5.46 pm]: We have a \$60m black hole in the state budget that is growing. This has an adverse effect on the Police, Education and Health budgets. Members of this Chamber have previously identified the problem. The Attorney General has had this to say -

It is a serious problem that despite the fact that we know this State is short of cash this Government is spending an awful lot of money on what are plainly political promotions . . . However, we do not have enough money for police, hospitals, education or social services in this State. We do not have sufficient money for the things we need. It is patently clear from the rush of glossy brochures which have been published recently that it is not legitimate Government expenditure; it is the Government paying for all its advertising material, pamphlets and holding election community meetings out of the public purse.

That was in 1992. Of course, the lesser acolytes chimed in - Hon Phillip Pental, Hon Barry House and Hon Derrick Tomlinson.

Hon Simon O'Brien: Athos, Porthos and Aramis?

Hon J.A. COWDELL: Yes, the musketeers. I see the interest of the Deputy President is aroused by the fine sentiments previously expressed.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Hon Derrick Tomlinson): It was the reference to muscatel.

Hon J.A. COWDELL: In 1992 the Royal Commission into Commercial Activities of Government and Other Matters expressed its concern and stated -

The Commission's concern has been with the scope for abuse, by way of deception, disinformation, and positive political manipulation . . . But the public is entitled to be protected from information which is tainted at its source.

What was the solution to this identified abuse of power? Mere conventions and government codes of conduct were nowhere near sufficient; statutory provisions were required. Hon Phillip Pental introduced legislation in 1989 on behalf of the Liberal Opposition. The General Elections (Prohibition of Government Advertising) Bill was introduced on 19 April 1989. Hon Phillip Pental expressed Liberal Party concerns about government advertising. He stated -

Efforts to get to the bottom of all this have not achieved much. We do know, as a result of questions I asked the Premier last week, that \$10.4 million has been spent in 1987-88 in such areas as Government advertising in the field of tourism, health, State Government Insurance Office, lotteries and the R & I Bank. But fresh questions were needed to flush out further details. Nothing is volunteered.

We now know that \$636 000 was spent on television and press advertisements about the care and respect of family and law and order packages. That is, two-thirds of \$1m was spent by the Government on advertising which was a blatant attempt to prop up an ailing Government. Why were statutory controls needed? Mr Pental stated -

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Hon Derrick Tomlinson): Order! Hon Phillip Pental was the Honourable then and he is the Honourable now.

Hon J.A. COWDELL: He is indeed; the Honourable carries over. Hon Phillip Pental stated -

No area of the public domain requires a greater level of scrupulousness on the part of Governments than the use of propaganda; even the use of money by Governments is of less moment.

It is certainly a serious matter to misuse the taxes that Governments administer on behalf of taxpayers, but in the main, money that has been misused can ultimately be accounted for by auditors. However, propagandising by Government is a far more serious and insidious activity.

I put it to the House that if that practice were followed as a matter of course, one-party Government would emerge in Australia. The sheer power in the hands of the incumbent Government to commission research with government funds and produce advertising with government funds would simply overwhelm any Opposition.

What was required? The Bill provided that, notwithstanding the provisions of any written law or rule of law, the Government should not, during the prescribed period, advertise or cause to be advertised, by or through any communication medium, any existing, new or modified service provided or funded by the Government. The

prescribed period was six months before a full-term election or on the issue of writs if it was not a full-term election.

The next piece of grandstanding by the Liberal Party was the much hyped Foss amendments to the Electoral Amendment (Political Finance) Bill 1992. The Labor Government's legislation contained provision for a new section 175ZE of the Electoral Act requiring the disclosure of advertising and related expenditure in the annual reports of government agencies. According to Liberal members, this was window dressing. The Labor government leader in the upper House, Hon Joe Berinson, stated -

The question of Government expenditure on advertising, particularly around election time, has often been raised as a problem requiring attention. That has led in turn, to more thoroughgoing provisions dealing with the expenditure on advertising by Government and associated agencies at any time, and the issue which this raises was considered most recently by the Queensland Electoral and Administrative Review Commission. That commission recommended that Commonwealth legislation on this matter should be adopted in Queensland, and the amendment which I have moved would have the effect of adopting the Commonwealth pattern of accountability for expenditure on advertising and related activities in this State as well.

It will be noted that the amendment which I have circulated is not restricted to advertising in the pre-election period only.

Hon Peter Foss was at his pontificating best yet again. He said -

The clause does not go far enough. In particular, it does not deal with the amount of money incurred by or on behalf of a public agency during the reporting period in relation to providing people to work in polling organisations.

Hon Peter Foss then moved an amendment based on the Pandal Bill of 1989. He moved for the insertion of a new part VIA under the heading "Prevention of use of government resources for political purposes". Proposed section 176A stated that the government shall not, during the prescribed period, advertise or cause to be advertised by or through any communication medium, any existing, new or modified service provided or funded by the Government or any policy of the Government or the party to which the Government belongs, unless the same is required to respond to an emergency or disaster.

Members who were in the Chamber at the time will recall that there were a few problems with this amendment. It meant that the Electoral Commissioner could not advertise the forthcoming election because it may not have been classed as an emergency. Problems also arose with advertising vacation swimming classes, Quit campaigns, Red Cross blood banks, St John Ambulance and many other matters. Hon Joe Berinson proposed a more acceptable new section 191B to implement the requirements of Hon Peter Foss and the Liberal Opposition. It was the Liberal Opposition that forced the amendment to define the relevant period as three years and six months after the previous election, or from the issue of the writs.

The Electoral Amendment (Political Finance) Bill was passed in 1992. It was not proclaimed in the remaining three months of the Labor Government due to some of the problems previously alluded to. It was all or nothing. Parts of the Bill could not be proclaimed separately. However, in February 1993 a change of government occurred. The self-proclaimed righteous, the Liberal Opposition, became the Government. There would be change in the reprehensible advertising practices that had been practised by the previous Labor Administration.

The Liberal Opposition was now in government, and we looked first to the statutory initiatives proposed by it when it was in opposition. After all, the Electoral Amendment (Political Finance) Bill had been passed in 1992. It needed only to be proclaimed or, if necessary, amended and then proclaimed. The new Government would no doubt want to amend the weak window-dressing legislation of Labor, and would want to make it stronger along the lines it had suggested in 1992. The 1992 legislation might have been inadequate, but it contained a minimal measure requiring transparency of advertising; that is, all government departments and agencies had to disclose in their annual reports all advertising-related expenditure. However, even this - which was identified the year before as so little - was too much for the coalition Government. It took three years of parliamentary motions, opposition Bills and Commission on Government recommendations to get the Government to the starting blocks.

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Sitting suspended from 6.00 to 7.30 pm