October 13, 2009

Committee Secretariat:
Parliamentary Entitlements Review Committee
Dept of Finance and Deregulation
John Gorton Building
King Edward Tce
Parkes ACT 2600

Dear Chair,

Submission to the Parliamentary Entitlements Review Committee

Despite being a highly-experienced internet user, I was unable to find the information that is apparently on the internet concerning the terms of reference of this review and hence cannot address them directly.

Nevertheless, I hope that you will accept the following as a submission by a concerned Australian citizen and taxpayer.

I do not know the details of the entitlements of parliamentarians, although I know that they are wide-ranging, and include inter alia a generous salary (at least for backbenchers) and superannuation, plus allowances for travel (including airline lounge membership), accommodation, office expenses, staff salaries, entertainment, and postage. I understand that some of these allowances depend on the circumstances, e.g., access to business or first-class travel, access to Commonwealth cars in particular situations, etc. I also understand that these entitlements are different for ministers and perhaps for parliamentarians serving in roles such as chairs of parliamentary committees.

Most or many of these allowances seem to me, on the face of it, to be reasonable. However, what I, and I would confidently guess, most members of the Australian public do not know is the full extent of these entitlements as they are awarded to each individual Member of Parliament. Certainly the British public were pretty startled when they learned about the extent of their local members' entitlements.

My point, therefore, is that the various allowances and entitlements of each individual parliamentarian should be completely transparent. They are, after all, paid from the public purse. This transparency is very easily achieved. There must already be some accounting process which determines or audits individual entitlements on an annual basis. This information could easily be condensed into, say, a one-page annual statement for
each member or senator, and mailed out to all members of that parliamentarian's electorate. The cost of this would be minimal, as most parliamentarians already send newsletters to their electorate. Alternatively, the information for every individual member could be placed on their parliamentary website, or on a more general parliamentary website that was easily accessible to the public.

As a taxpayer, I believe that I am entitled to know what my elected member’s salary and entitlements are. There is no defensible reason to keep this information secret. However, if this information continues to be rather obscure, incomplete or difficult of access as it is now, Australian citizens will reasonably assume that something is being covered up.

It is my understanding that, in Britain, it was the press that ferreted out the details of individual entitlements, so presumably some bright spark in Australian journalism could and will eventually do the same thing. Clearly it is far preferable for this information to be revealed by the government than by the press, as the latter is likely to focus on the most egregious examples in the interest of “shocking” headlines.

Yours faithfully,

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