

***Editorial:* Democracy about more than voting**

5:00AM Friday November 16, 2007

We have called our campaign against the Electoral Finance Bill "Democracy under Attack". Some have questioned this, saying surely it is an issue of freedom of speech, not democracy. They are perhaps defining democracy in the narrow sense as the right to vote.

Democracy without free speech is a sham. Some of the most repressive states in recent history have called themselves democratic on the grounds that the solitary party permitted to express political views and take part in elections allowed people to vote. Saddam Hussein won his final election with something like 99 per cent of the vote. The Soviet Union was a carnival of elections; right down to factory level leaders were solemnly elected, but not if they spoke outside the party's permitted line.

Nobody is suggesting the Electoral Finance Bill will constrain political debate to that degree. The only element our Government has in common with those further left is that it shares their fear of private money in political debate. The bill is aimed not at outright bribery of voters – long outlawed – but at the right of independent organisations to promote issues of concern to them in an election year.

Not many do so in this country. The seven Exclusive Brethren who wanted to see Labour and the Greens defeated at the last election were a rare example of citizens wealthy enough to publicise their concerns. They did it maladroitly, believing they could keep their religious identity secret, and managed mainly to embarrass the party they wanted to support.

But election campaigns are supposed to be instructive public examinations of the people who want to represent us and make crucial decisions for us. The seven Brethren's extreme material naturally attracted a great deal of curiosity about who was behind it and whether the National Party had encouraged it. Those questions presented the party's then leader with an examination he did not always handle well. The exercise was instructive for voters.

The Electoral Finance Bill would rule out exercises such as that. Any organisation wishing to spend money to advance a view in election year would be required to disclose its intentions in advance to the Electoral Office, disclose the sources of its finance and face a limit on the amount it could spend.

Political parties must do all of that, though the bill as drafted puts non-parties under a much tighter financial restriction than parties, and another bill in the House this week allows parties to bypass the concerns of the Auditor-General about their use of public funds for electioneering. The political playing field is being tilted very much in favour of parties in Parliament.

Is it really necessary to restrict people's freedom to spend their own money if they want to participate in public debate? These are not people standing for election, they simply want to persuade voters to their point of view. Their success will depend on who they are (which they would be foolish to hide), the validity of their concerns and their powers of persuasion, much more than the money they spend.

Some have attempted to legitimise the bill by pointing to similar provisions in the United Kingdom. These are probably the same people so aghast at successive anti-terror laws passed in that country that whittled



away human rights and damaged its democratic credentials. The fact that political debate is less free elsewhere is no justification to pursue a lower common denominator here.

The genuinely democratic left hold that democracy requires not just free speech but roughly equal speech. Since wealth is unequal, they want to control its influence on elections if they can. But people are unequal in many ways. Some are more intelligent than others, some more attractive, some more energetic or well organised or simply more interested in politics than most people. Should they have unequal influence?

A healthy democracy welcomes contributions from them all.

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