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### State-funding plan can drop: Burton

Monday, 16th April 2007

Wellington: Justice Minister Mark Burton says he would not be worried if a proposal to state-fund elections was dropped.

The Government is preparing legislation to revamp election spending rules after controversies following the 2005 general election over inappropriate use of taxpayer funds, third party support and secret donations.

No formal proposals have been released, but informal ones included tightening the rules around anonymous donations and third party campaigns.

It is understood that under the proposed changes the cost of third-party campaigns would be capped at \$60,000. The Government and Greens were outraged at the last election when the Exclusive Brethren put out pamphlets smearing the two parties in a million-dollar campaign.

Proposals were also understood to include a \$10 million three-year boost in state funding for parties.

Possible supporters of the legislation New Zealand First and United Future have for the past few weeks made it clear they oppose a move to largely state-funded election campaigns there is already some state funding and now the Maori Party also says it opposes it.

Speaking on TVNZ's Agenda programme on Saturday, Mr Burton said he would not be worried if the statefunding proposal was dropped.

"We've got to put together a package that can enjoy significant support in order to progress, whether or not it includes state funding is of not great consequence compared to the overarching rationale for this package, that is open, transparent, fair electoral process," he said.

Mr Burton said the main goal was to prevent a repeat of the "sort of hidden transactions that characterised the 2005 election by the Exclusive Brethren".

Meanwhile, seven senior members of the Exclusive Brethren church are considering waging another campaign against the Government at the next election.

The group is also against the proposals, saying the Government was trying to rewrite electoral laws to suit itself.

National deputy leader Bill English welcomed the opposition of smaller parties to state funding and said the Greens should follow suit.

National is angry that Labour failed to consult it on proposals.

"Labour needs to stop the shadow boxing and open up the process," Mr English said.

On Agenda, Act New Zealand leader Rodney Hide was scathing about how the proposals were being handled.

"What we are seeing is the Labour Party with its mates behind closed doors actually sitting down designing the rules for the next election, and for the elections after that; about how political parties can behave," he said.

He said a public process should be held and it should not be run by politicians.

Green Party co-leader Russel Norman agreed.

"I think there's no question this is not the ideal process."

He said the Electoral Commission or another body should have been given the job immediately after the election but it was too late now and something had to be done before the next election. NZPA

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