

Submission to the Minister of Justice on the proposed Electoral Finance Reform Bill

The National Council of Women of New Zealand (NCWNZ) is an umbrella organisation representing 50 nationally organised societies and national members. It has 26 branches throughout the country attended by representatives of those societies and some 150 other societies as well as individual members. The Council's function is to serve women, the family and the community at local, national and international level through research, study, discussion and action.

Members were asked to indicate a preference for the options provided in the Government's proposals for state funding (proposal 2), the regulated campaign period (proposal 6) and parallel campaigning (proposal 8). Four Branches responded providing responses from 45 members.

2. State Funding Options

The options are:

2a Retain the status quo

OR

2b Moderate reform

OR

2c Significant reform.

All members opted for moderate reform. Members accepted that the role of the media has changed with modern technology continually opening more ways of receiving information. Political parties need the freedom to choose where they place their advertising, but members agreed that the system must be transparent and accountable as well as fair.

6. Regulated Campaign Period Options

The Government is consulting on four options for the commencement and length of the regulated period. The first three options are to fix the date that the regulated period commences. The fourth option is retention of the status quo. The Government is seeking submissions on which of the following options is preferred:

6a commencement on writ day (i.e. a likely regulated period of approximately four to five weeks)

OR

6b commencement on 1 August in the third year of the election cycle (i.e. a likely regulated period of approximately three to four months depending on the date of the election)

OR

6c commencement on 1 May in the third year of the election cycle (i.e. a likely regulated period of approximately five to six months depending on the date of the election)

OR

6d the final option is to retain the status quo where the regulated period commences three months before the date of the election.

If option 6b, 6c or 6d is supported, the Government is consulting on two further options to address situations of snap or early elections:

6e the regulated period to commence three months before election date (which is the status quo, and may result in retrospective application of the regulated period in some cases)

OR

6f a regulated period that starts from the date of the announcement of the election date (this will avoid retrospective application of the regulated period).

Members agreed with option 6b (Writ day or 1 August commencement).

Members thought that 4-5 weeks is an appropriate time for campaigning – long enough to hear all points of view and for voters to remain interested and involved. Some were strongly against long campaigns because the public become bored and a long campaign provides increased opportunity for politicking to become unpleasant and devious. It was noted that a particular government's term in office is relatively short, no more than three years and out of that time, time taken for the run-up to an election is a time when parliamentary business is suspended. Consequently it was argued that the campaign period should be as short as possible. Some members suggested that there should be a fixed election day by law, to provide certainty for voters and campaigners. Such a regime would require no special provision for a snap-election.

The other option to deal with a snap election should be 6f.

8. Parallel Campaigning Options

8a The first option is a proportionate regulatory scheme that focuses on expenditure by parallel campaigners

OR

8b The second option is to retain the status quo

8c allow parallel campaigners to advertise on radio and television, provided that they are subject to a system of proportionate regulation (the first option proposed for the overall regulation of parallel campaigners - option 8a)

OR

8d retain the current ban.

Most members preferred Option 8a to promote and support freedom of expression but they insisted on clear identification, accountability and transparency in their supporting campaigns. Members thought that parallel campaigners should register with the Electoral Commission. Their registration threshold should be the same as for political parties. Expenditure should be limited to \$200,000, with the condition that they account for sources of political donations, as is the case for political parties. Certainly, key office holders or spokespersons should be registered and identified in advertisements.

Only NZ citizens, permanent residents or NZ based organisations should be permitted to engage in parallel campaigning.

Some chose option 8b to retain the status quo.

NCWNZ has always had a strong interest in matters relating to franchise and elections and members look forward to discussing the Electoral Financial Reform Bill when it is distributed for discussion in 2010.

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