

# LIFT THE VEIL ON POLITICAL DONATIONS

By  
**Australian Democrats' Accountability Spokesperson, Senator  
Andrew Murray**

The recent informative articles on political donations published by the *Sydney Morning Herald* are to be commended. It is hoped that other Australian media will join in and focus on the ways the major political parties in particular, still avoid full disclosure of donations to them. Action will eventually follow if there is enough media pressure.

The Australian Democrats have long campaigned for the full and transparent disclosure of donations by what are referred to by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) as 'third party entities' such as foundations, trusts and clubs. Donors identities are hidden from disclosure by such means.

Indeed, a recent *Bulletin* contains an article depicting such a strategy. Entitled 'Laurie Brereton's Magic Carpet', it outlined how the ALP's McKell Foundation had provided Mr Brereton with a stream of money for overseas travel. His access to tens of thousands of dollars they claim has made him 'the best travelled Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs in Australian history'. That's fine – but disclose the source of the funds.

Mr Brereton is far from alone. The Liberal Greenfields Foundation is one of the many entities used by the major political parties to avoid disclosure of the real origins of donated monies.

Unfortunately, every time there has been a tightening of disclosure laws over the last two decades, so too have new ways being found to get around them. Politicians and their benefactors are still finding ways to conceal donor identities. That's not on. The system is trying to curb the impact of big money by ensuring public disclosure of those who are trying to influence political parties.

To put an end to suspect fund raising practices, the Democrats have moved amendments in parliament. So far both major parties have turned them down. We are trying again. Our Australian Democrats' Minority Report into the 1998 Federal Election called for amendments to make it obligatory for political parties to return monies donated to foundations, trusts and clubs unless strict and full disclosure occurred. Basically, they unveil the true identities of big donors to the public.

This is a battle that is far from won. The health of Australian democracy at all levels must no longer be compromised by any suspicion that hidden money influences our political system. It is essential that electoral funding reform end any notion of the corrupting influence of money and policy direction.

Should the cynical use of exploiting loopholes in the disclosure laws continue, then so too will the widespread public disillusionment with Australia's electoral system. Nobody should be able to hide behind any entity - this is an unassailable principle. That principle applies to foundations, trusts, clubs and to fundraising functions as well. Political parties must disclose donors. Full stop.

(452 words)