

## **Maxine McKew: Why we might thank Sam Dastyari some day**

### **ANALYSIS**

To re-work a phrase from Paul Keating, every galah in every pet shop is suddenly spruiking the importance of campaign finance reform.

If the players are serious about reversing a decade of shameful neglect, we may come to see the events of the past eight days as Sam Dastyari's gift to a grateful nation – one which will help put a bit of trust back into our democracy.

Make no mistake, this is a golden moment and the best thing the Australian media can do is to keep up the pressure and continue to ask the narky questions.

Above all, refuse to tolerate any Hamlet-style prevarication from the politicians based on the supposed need for more inquiries, more reports, etc, etc.

The fact is, we are drowning in detail about what needs to be done.

So here's a helpful tip for Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull: send a staffer lickety split off to the Parliamentary Library and locate a copy of Dr Kerry Schott's comprehensive series of reports prepared recently for the NSW government.

They were completed with bi-partisan support from John Watkins and Andrew Tink and provide a disturbing analysis of the distortions and potential for corruption that arise from our fragmented and inadequate donations laws.

For an even greater appreciation of the efforts of previous reform warriors, the PM should also have a look inside the pages of the 2008 Green paper prepared by Senator John Faulkner when he was Special Minister of State in the Rudd Labor Government.

It's a case of 'read it and weep' with Faulkner warning: "The choice before us is whether to seek to adapt ourselves, or to throw up our hands and allow participants in the political system to do what they

want.”

Of course that’s exactly where we are at. A case of ‘do what you like as long as you can get away with it’.

This may be a harsh judgement but in the pointed absence of any other explanation I suspect that Sam Dastyari feels that the only ‘wrong’ of the past week is the fact that fellow Senator Cory Bernardi came after him and hit a bullseye.

As for Senator Bernardi (aka Turnbull’s nemesis), an **article** by Gina McColl in Friday’s Fairfax press highlights Bernardi’s involvement in the Conservative Leadership Foundation (CLF).

According to McColl the CLF “inhabits a grey area in the political donations system and permits gifts from foreign donors”.

So the first test for the PM next week is whether he abandons his ludicrous position of waiting to hear from the Parliament’s Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters.

This is the outfit that has had five chairpersons since 2014. Let’s name them – Tony Smith, Alex Hawke, Jane Prentice, David Coleman and Scott Buchholz.

Heard from any of them lately? Familiar with their views on donations reform? Mmm. Thought so.

The JSCEM has about as much impact as a squashed cabbage leaf.

So what should we aim for and what’s achievable?

The full monty would look like this: uniform laws that apply across the country, on-time disclosure, strict caps on donations (under \$1000) and allowable only from individual voters, a ban on donations from corporates, unions and other third party entities, higher penalties for breaches, and a ban on foreign donors.

If anyone believes that all this would take us back to the days of the lamington drive then consider that the largest funder of political campaigns is the taxpayer and at over \$3 per eligible vote, the level of public funding is already generous.

Of course the Tories won't want to give an inch on money from the big end of town.

Ditto for the ALP which wants dosh from the unions.  
But this is a case of not letting the perfect be the enemy of the good.

So c'mon girls and boys – start negotiating and legislate for the better system that Australians deserve.

*Maxine McKew is a director of the John Cain Foundation which continues to advocate for donations reform. She is also a former MP who served on the front bench under Labor prime ministers Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. Before entering politics she was an award-winning broadcast journalist at the ABC.*