

Leader's Letter



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Parliament has not been a place to be proud of in recent weeks. The aftermath of the Phillip Field saga; the row over parliamentary spending and the appalling behaviour of the two main parties in the debating chamber have all contributed to the worst period in politics that I can recall in over 20 years as an MP.

It is time to pull back from the brink, before the reputation of our parliamentary democracy is damaged beyond repair. That will take calm heads, and a commitment to the greater good of our country, rather than just the pursuit of party politics as usual. Sadly, I am not yet confident there is sufficient will in the two old parties for that to happen.

Of course, that does not mean that the issues that have given rise to all this are unimportant, or should be swept under the carpet.

As far as the Field case is concerned, I think it has been badly handled. The Ingram Report took far too long to complete, cost the taxpayer far too much, and was far too inconclusive in its findings to be of any value. It was certainly the vindication Mr Field claimed. An independent Police inquiry as is now underway is the proper way to address the issues, including the matters of criminality, and to determine the course that flows from there. As for Mr Field, his reputation and political career are in tatters, and it is difficult to see how he can possibly continue to serve as MP for Mangere.

The issue of parliamentary spending is equally vexed. United Future has always been utterly scrupulous in its parliamentary spending. We have deliberately had every advertisement or leaflet for which we have sought parliamentary funding checked by the Parliamentary Service prior to publication, and in cases where questions have been raised we have either modified the item in question accordingly, or not proceeded.

On the few occasions there have been external complaints against us, successive Speakers of the House have always found us to have been acting within the rules. Imagine then our shock to have received the Auditor-General's preliminary finding that tens of thousands of dollars of our spending was illegal.

Like other parties, we are stunned and puzzled by this turn of events, given that we have been so careful to follow the rules as

we understood them. Obviously, there needs to be clarification of the rules to overcome this problem and ensure there are no repetitions in the future

But the more immediate question that deserves an answer which has not yet been forthcoming is how is it that the interpretations of the rules by the parties and the Parliamentary Service have obviously been so at variance with the interpretation now made by the Auditor-General. The inference, which is rapidly gaining credence in the wider community, that all parties and the MPs within them are corrupt is as wrong as it is destructive of our individual reputations, something I resent bitterly.

Requiring parties to pay back the expenditure ultimately deemed to be illegal, no matter that it was incurred in good faith, is undoubtedly the popular and obvious solution, but that is fraught with some difficulties.

In most cases, parties, particularly the smaller ones, will struggle to find that amount of money, and will in turn be severely hampered in their ability to raise the funds necessary to fight the next election. Some parties may be able to call on sympathetic benefactors to bail them out, although that is probably a less likely outcome.

Either way, the real loser will be our parliamentary democracy.

The Auditor-General's zeal may well have the unintended long-term consequence of neutering the newer parties and concentrating power back into the hands of the two established parties. That was hardly what people voted for when they voted for MMP.

To go back to my opening point, it would surely be the ultimate irony if the outcome of the Auditor-General's inquiry was to return political power by stealth to the old duopoly whose behaviour in recent weeks has provided the strongest argument why more fundamental political reform is required.

It's conference time again and now, more than ever, we need your energy and support.

The United Future party conference will be at the Arts Centre of Christchurch, corner of Hereford Street & Rolleston Ave Saturday 4 November 2006, 10am – 5pm.

A registration form can be downloaded from the website www.unitedfuture.org.nz.

As you can see in the areas of tax reform and behaviour in the House, the smaller parties can exercise considerable influence. With your support, we can be even stronger and more Influential.

More from the strange but true files: September 11th is a grim day for politicians. While it is now immortalised as the anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, it is also the day on which many former world leaders have met their maker. Pakistan's first Prime Minister Mohammed Ali Jinnah, former South African Prime Minister Jan Smuts, former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, and Chile's President Salvador Allende all died on this day.

Best regards

Peter Dunne