*A ‘cancer on our democracy’: How to fix Australia’s pork-barrelling crisis*

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Amid higher fuel and food costs, and the spectre of looming interest rate hikes, Australian families are busily battening down the hatches on their household budgets.

How galling it is, then, to watch the nation’s politicians merrily traipsing around the country maxing out the national credit card on netball courts, surf lifesaver change rooms and boondoggle infrastructure projects to buy votes in marginal electorates.

It’s called pork-barrelling and it’s time we had an urgent national conversation about how to stop it.

After all, we end up picking up the tab for these dubious projects via the taxes we pay. And how much tax we pay is, of course, a key driver of our cost of living.

Few Australians begrudge the money governments spend on public goods and services which pass a cost-benefit analysis and enhance our national quality of living. Good schools, hospitals, roads and welfare for the less fortunate, for example.

But the election-time flurry of spending in marginal seats is a growing cancer on our democracy.

Scott Morrison warned the 'world is changing' as he paid tribute to the fallen in Darwin this morning.

I’ve been closely observing the election spending commitments of the two major political parties as a journalist since the 2007 election. This year, I happily passed the baton to my fellow spreadsheet wizards Shane Wright and Katina Curtis. On Monday, they revealed the [**astonishing amount of taxpayer money**](https://www.theage.com.au/politics/federal/coalition-has-promised-voters-833m-a-day-as-it-outspends-labor-in-campaign-mode-20220422-p5afd8.html) which has already been funnelled into key swing seats in this election.

Believe me, the task of tracking election spending pledges is a time-consuming and nerve-wracking exercise, indeed. In reality, the bacon started flying last year – do you count that? Do you count the pre-election budget’s largesse? Do you count money announced for projects from previously announced funding pools?

Of course, nothing politicians do during the election campaign make this important task any easier. The parties are required to keep no central register or tally of their policy and spending commitments. They have websites, it’s true, but they’re hard to navigate and incomplete. Parties only release fully costed tables showing a complete list of their policies in the dying days of a campaign – by which time it’s too late for most voters, and the media, to do much with.

Instead, election campaigns have become an excruciatingly slow policy striptease, with new spending announcements carefully stage-managed and drip fed to journalists at press conferences. Or worse, they’re covertly announced on candidate Facebook pages, which are hard to track.

This lack of transparency not only keeps voters in the dark, it allows for simply bad spending proposals to flourish.

So, what can be done to improve the transparency of election policy proposals and give voters – and the media – more time to digest them?

Australia currently has two official government websites dedicated to revealing the spending promises of political parties during elections. One is run by the Department of Finance at [**electioncostings.gov.au**](http://www.electioncostings.gov.au/). At the time of writing – less than four weeks from polling day – it displays just four minor policies from the government.

The other website is that of the Parliamentary Budget Office, an independent agency which reports directly to parliament, not executive government. The PBO is a marvellous democratic innovation, created about a decade ago at the request of several independent MPs as a condition of siding with Julia Gillard to avoid a hung parliament.

[**It’s a pork-barrelled circus in our marginal seats**](https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/it-s-a-pork-barrelled-circus-in-our-marginal-seats-20220422-p5afbm.html)

The PBO is tasked with compiling a complete list of the parties’ election commitments. Yay! This list, however, is not released until well after polling day. What the?

The PBO’s main job currently is putting a price tag on policy proposals of both the government and opposition parties – if they request it. Parties can submit their policies for confidential costing prior to the election campaign. But the PBO has no authority to release them publicly. Policies submitted and costed during the campaign are, however, made public on the PBO’s website. At the time of writing, that website displays exactly zero policies.

We can do better.

Legislation should require both major parties to submit complete lists of their election policy and spending proposals to the PBO prior to the start of the election campaign. The PBO should publish these lists – along with full costings – as soon as possible during the campaign so that voters and journalists alike can thoroughly investigate and analyse the proposals on offer.

Not only would voters be more informed, such a process of public scrutiny – facilitated by the parliament – would drive the development of better policy proposals in the first place – or, at least, ones less blatantly skewed to marginal electorates.

[**Coalition has promised voters $833m a day as it outspends Labor in campaign mode**](https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/coalition-has-promised-voters-833m-a-day-as-it-outspends-labor-in-campaign-mode-20220422-p5afd8.html)

In addition to better transparency around election commitments, public spending could also be improved by new legislation to govern the distribution of taxpayer money from pre-existing ‘grants’ programs, such as grants for local community and sporting projects. All such grant programs should be audited in a timely fashion by the Australian National Audit Office. The audit should include a breakdown of successful projects by electorate.

As for grants programs themselves, individual ministers should be stripped of their power to unilaterally decide grant recipients. Grants should be subject to a cost-benefit analysis, made publicly available on a central registry.

Finally, individual grants should be subject to a minimum threshold amount, say $1 million, to ensure federal politicians remain concerned only with matters of national importance, and not running around the country acting like trumped-up local councillors installing new CCTV cameras and barbecue facilities in target seats.

This reckless pork barrelling must stop.