Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the Government Agencies (Campaign Advertising) Amendment Bill 2025

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Submitter: The Australia Institute

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Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Integrity Commission and Statutory Office Holders

Dear Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry into the Government Agencies (Campaign Advertising) Amendment Bill 2025.

The bill would amend the ACT's existing regulations around government advertising to further restrict campaigns which could be seen as promoting particular politicians or parties, especially surrounding election periods.

The Australia Institute's research on this topic has been limited to the Commonwealth Government and federal advertising spending. It finds that Commonwealth regulation around government advertising is generally insufficient to meet public expectations, and that government campaigns risk adding to the already significant advantages afforded to incumbent politicians facing re-election.

I have attached two reports that might be of assistance to the committee:

- Browne (2022) *Bad impressions: Scrutiny of government advertising*
- Predavec & Browne (2025) *Advantages of incumbency*

The Australia Institute's 2022 report *Bad impressions: Scrutiny of government advertising* finds that:

- Australian state, territory and federal governments spent $610 million on advertising campaigns in 2021. While COVID-19 related campaigns likely contributed to the size of this sum, it still demonstrates the significant amount of money that Australian governments spend on advertising.
- The Commonwealth Government had spent at least $100 million on advertising every year since 2011, including $143 million in 2020-21 – more than the ad spends of Woolworths ($118 million), McDonald's ($83 million), and Amazon ($53 million).
- The best placed body to independently review government advertising is the Auditor-General, as recommended by a Senate committee in 2005.
- 76% of Australians agreed the Auditor-General should be responsible for reviewing government advertising to make sure it meets the genuine information needs of the community.

While outside the scope of this particular bill, I recommend the committee also consider whether the ACT Auditor-General could take on (a) the powers that s 18(1A) would bestow on party leaders and (b) the position of independent campaign reviewer from the existing legislation.

Advantages of incumbency outlines the incumbency benefits that every parliamentarian enjoys and those specific to the government of the day. A communications allowance is an example of the former while control over taxpayer-funded government advertising is an example of the latter.

The bill would extend restrictions around territory government advertising to cover Commonwealth election periods. This could reduce, albeit in a small way, the significant resource advantages that the party in government enjoys.

Finally, the bill is of interest as a private member's bill seeking to amend an act that began as a private member's bill (introduced by Liberal Opposition Leader Zed Seselja in 2008) – specifically, one opposed "in-principle" by the government of the day.

The ACT's excellent electoral system, including proportional representation, makes it more likely for a power-sharing parliament to be elected – one in which any parliamentarian, whether a minister, shadow minister, backbencher or crossbencher, can see a good idea become law.

Regards,

Bill Browne
Director – Democracy and Accountability
The Australia Institute