

Was the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM) Inquiry "a political witch-hunt?"

by Dr Amy McGrath OAM

The Leader of the Senate Opposition, Senator John Faulkner, has depicted the 'Pyne' inquiry of the Joint Standing Committee of the Federal Parliament, of which he was a member, as '*a political witch-hunt*' both in the fact it was called in the first place, and in the manner of its hearings.

The Coalition had no alternative but to call it given the fact that there had been an avalanche of reports of electoral scandals in Queensland involving the Commonwealth electoral roll (used also in State elections). Three people had been convicted for "*parachuting*" names, and one, Karen Ehrman sent to gaol. Her defence was that she was only a bit player in a grand scheme which had been endemic for many years. Others bore her out.

An AEC employee was said to have given out cards used to authenticate roll tampering. *The Courier Mail* published a claim by an authenticated whistleblower that he and his mates had used names of people, who had moved but were still on the roll, to vote for them in Fisher electorate in 1987 and numerous other state and federal elections. The Deputy Premier, Jim Elder, and other MP's of the Queensland Parliament had either resigned or been named.

And three inquiries were instituted - the Shepherdson inquiry into specific incidents, the Commonwealth Ombudsman into the Queensland Head Office of the AEC, the Federal Police into the 1987 federal election in Fisher. While the national media had alerted the country to the unprecedented revelations in Queensland, which sparked off a crisis of confidence not only in the integrity of the Commonwealth roll, if such a rampant culture of corruption existed, but in all politicians and parties.

If the ALP had been in power, it would have been obliged to choose the same response as the Coalition - to call an inquiry, ask for public submissions, and summon witnesses and call the Australian Electoral Commission to account as to whether the failings were due to its management, the Commonwealth Electoral Act, or both.

Did the inquiry become "*a political witch-hunt*?" By the very nature of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters this was unlikely. It is a cross-party committee of ten members - five ALP and Democrat and five Coalition. Its proceedings resulted from compromise.

Central to its inquiry had to be whether the rampant fraudulent enrolment in Queensland could have occurred for so many years, why it had occurred, and how it should be combated. The evidence of the handful of witnesses, who had admitted to fraud before the Shepherdson Inquiry, was chiefly relevant to the Australian Electoral Commission's management.

It was the defence of the senior management of the Australian Electoral Commission not only to the compelling evidence of negligence in their responsibility *of* maintaining an accurate electoral roll, but to the biting criticisms of their own Queensland Divisional Returning Officers testifying in a private capacity to their management, which dominated the work *of* the 'Pyne' inquiry. Thus the AEC was in the dock far more than the ALP.

However, the three ALP members not surprisingly were sensitive to the fact that the Queensland electoral scandals remained a black cloud on the horizon, damaging to the ALP. Senator John Faulkner's political instinct impelled him into damage control and tactics to enhance any opportunity to imply that the ALP was not alone in any perceived culture of corruption. The allegation of "*a political witch-hunt*" emerged from the few affrays that ensued. It is still being peddled but is not justified. The "*witches*" had already been found before, and during, the Shepherdson Inquiry appointed by Premier Beattie.

The Inquiry had to be called, and would equally have been called *if* the ALP had governed in Canberra. The Democrats have given thoughtful support at all stages. Its findings include support for Coalition legislation for identification on enrolment passed late 1999, and since rejected by all ALP state and territory governments; and for the AEC becoming proactive in pursuit of fraud rather than pro-negative as in the past.

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