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**TITLE: Duty of MPs to stay full term**

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Is Alexander Downer trying to tell us something? Dodging question time for lunch with a journalist, skipping a whole day of parliament for a spot of golf with Mark Vaile, and now trying his hand at radio broadcasting. After the highs of international diplomacy, it would appear that opposition is just too tedious.

All the signals indicate that Mr Downer will be out of federal parliament within the year. Some have welcomed his impending resignation. If the current member for Mayo isn't interested in representing his electorate in the national parliament, they suggest, then the voters should replace him with someone who is.

But Mr Downer made a commitment to his electorate in the lead-up to the last election. His obligation is now to represent it in the national parliament to the best of his abilities.

Although it often takes place out of the public eye, there is much valuable work that is carried out by backbenchers on both sides of the chamber, particularly in the committee room and on behalf of local constituents. By leaving parliament prematurely, the former foreign minister is essentially indicating that such work is now beneath him.

But is it acceptable for former government members to leave early purely because they have lost government? At the least, there should be recognition of the shirking of responsibility that this entails. There should also be some contribution towards the considerable costs of holding by-elections.

Of course, the funding of elections (including by-elections) is one of the financial costs of democracy. As a rule it is money well spent. But if there were financial penalties associated with not fulfilling a basic election commitment like serving out a full term, perhaps our parliamentarians would pay more attention to the importance of meeting their obligations.

Under the Commonwealth Electoral Act, House of Representatives and Senate candidates who receive 4 per cent or more of formal first preference votes are entitled to receive public election funding (whether they are elected or not). At present, they receive around \$2.14 for each first preference vote.

Most of this money is paid to political parties within four weeks of polling day. In 2004, \$41.9 million was paid to parties and to independent candidates, including

\$18.0 million to the Liberal Party and \$16.7 million to the Labor Party. Again, since it is used to cover the costs of the democratic process, this is entirely appropriate.

Election funding is payable after both general elections and by-elections. This means that there is some financial incentive for political parties to precipitate a by-election, although this is usually offset by the electoral risk involved, and of course the cost of running an extra campaign. But in a safe seat, where the sitting member is going to retire anyway, the major parties could end up benefiting financially from a by-election.

It is time for this loophole to be closed. It is the responsibility of each political party to pre-select candidates who, in their estimation, are able to meet their electoral commitments – including hanging around for the full term of the parliament, whether or not their party ends up forming government.

Election funding should therefore be withheld (or taken back) from those parties whose elected candidates fail to serve for a certain period - say half of their elected term, or 18 months. This would encourage political parties to pre-select candidates who will stick around regardless of the overall outcome of the election.

Of course, some politicians resign from parliament for genuine reasons. Illness could prevent someone from discharging their duties properly, and should be treated with compassion. If medical evidence is produced, then no financial penalty should apply. If the former member then takes on a high-paying consultancy position, it would be apparent that they left on false terms.

There are also circumstances where it is very much in a party's interests to put forward a local candidate who may well end up retiring before the next election, particularly if it does not form government. Had John Howard won in Bennelong, for example, it is likely that a by-election would have been held in that seat anyway. In this case it would be up to the party to weigh up the wider benefits of that person's candidature against the possible financial penalties.

Representing one's constituency for the duration of the parliament is a duty that all elected members must carry out, but serving in the ministry is a privilege that very few are granted. If some members choose to leave parliament before their term is up simply because they have lost the political influence they once had, then their parties should be forced to take responsibility for their decisions.

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