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TITLE: MPs' long campaign, with three years left

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I think that politicians work hard. I still think that even after Tony Abbott announced that the House of Representatives will sit for only 72 days next year. But the issue isn't whether they work hard, it's what they work hard on.

Successful politicians have always been obsessed with getting re-elected, but modern politicians start work on that project the day after they win office. Day after day, week after week, the modern politician is courting the votes of their electorate, counting the visits to their website and bringing in expert advice to develop new "strategies" to maximise the impact of the taxpayer-funded junk mail that floods out of their office.

Parliamentary sitting days are incredibly disruptive to the smooth operation of a three-year election campaign.

Once upon a time parliamentarians based their re-election campaigns on the contribution they had made to the Parliament. While it has always been easier for ministers to explain what they had been doing in Canberra, backbenchers were expected to use their voice and their vote to ensure that the issues that mattered to their electorate were reflected in the legislation that passed through the Parliament.

How things change. The days when any Australian could get to the bottom of the issues being considered by Parliament by listening to the parliamentary debate have all but disappeared. Most of the speeches are based on speaking notes prepared by the party leader's office, and most of the points made focus on the perceived failings of the opposing political party rather than the actual strengths or weaknesses of the legislation.

Consider the Minerals Resource Rent Tax Repeal and Other Measures Bill 2013 which is currently before the Senate. As the name of the legislation cleverly suggests, one of the purposes of the bill is to repeal the mining tax. But, perhaps unsurprisingly, the title also seeks to downplay the significance of the "other measures" it contains.

One of those "other measures" is the removal of the Low Income Superannuation Contribution, or LISC. The LISC was introduced to overcome one of the more obscene inequities in the

superannuation system - low income workers were required to pay more tax on the money they were forced to put into super than they would on their ordinary earnings.

That is, while middle and particularly high income earners get very generous tax concessions on their superannuation, people who earn less than the \$18,200 tax-free threshold were required to pay 15 per cent tax on their retirement contributions which would otherwise be tax-free.

Unfortunately for low income earners, Labor announced that it would fix this inequity at the same time that it announced it would introduce the mining tax. The two policies have nothing in common other than the date of their announcement but, in a world where perception is political reality and parliamentary debate is desultory, such a coincidence is enough justification for returning to the situation where low income earners are the only group which pays more tax on their savings than they do on their income.

So, do our politicians understand this issue, and if so, do they care?

At last week's Senate inquiry into the impact of the Minerals Resource Rent Tax Repeal and Other Measures Bill 2013, the Australian Council of Social Service, the ACTU and The Australia Institute all raised concerns about abolishing the LISC. It was pointed out to the government members of the inquiry that were the bill to become law, a person earning \$200,000 a year would save \$300 in tax for every \$1000 they put into super, while a low income earner would pay an additional \$150 in tax for every \$1000 they were forced to put into super.

But what is more surprising than the incredible inequity of the abolition of the LISC was the response of the government members. Liberal senator Alan Eggleston responded to the description of the proposed law by saying "I think we should separate the social policy objectives, which we are obviously very concerned about, from the operation of this tax." If Senator Eggleston was genuinely concerned about the removal of the LISC, he would presumably argue against doing so in Parliament. Similarly, if he, like most people, thinks that giving Gina Rinehart a tax cut and making low income earners pay more tax on their super are separate issues, then he should tell the Parliament that and vote accordingly. But speaking up about what he thinks and voting in accordance with his constituents' interests is, it seems, no longer part of the "hard work" of being a parliamentarian.

Perhaps surprisingly, the Coalition's policy to scrap the LISC will hit National Party constituents the hardest. An analysis by The Australia Institute shows that the National Party represents five of the six electorates that will be hit hardest by the plan to make low income earners pay more tax on their super. Indeed, in Warren Truss' own electorate nearly 23,000 of his constituents will pay up to \$500 a year more in tax. Tony Abbott, Joe Hockey and Malcolm Turnbull all represent Liberal Party seats where workers will be least affected.

In the same week that the National Party demonstrated its power in cabinet by refusing to let US investors buy GrainCorp, the same party was refusing to comment on this proposal by their Coalition partners to slug up to 46 per cent of the workers in the hardest hit National Party seats.

Politicians in Australia do work hard but, unfortunately, too many spend all of their time campaigning for the next election rather than campaigning for the interests of their constituents. It takes hard work and discipline to talk about asylum seekers and debt regardless of what question you are asked. It takes hours and hours to get the photos for your campaign junk mail

just right and it can take years of schmoozing to raise the hundreds of thousands of dollars required to run ads that say nothing about the legislation that you voted for.

Slogans and junk mail have always been a part of politics, and they always will. But the role of parliamentarians is to debate draft legislation before they vote on it. The debate is supposed to ensure that they know what they are voting on and that their constituents' interests have been expressed.

But these days much of the hard work of politicians seems to go into avoiding debate and hiding from the fact that the "other measures" they vote for are devastating for large numbers of their constituents. And of course the best way to avoid such debate is to ensure that Parliament barely sits. Fewer sitting days doesn't mean our pollies aren't working hard, but it does mean they aren't working hard on improving and understanding legislation.

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