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**TITLE: This Party Game Must be Stopped**

**AUTHOR: Josh Fear**

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Alexander Downer's family must be pleased. Last weekend's byelection result makes it easy for him to retire from politics, safe in the knowledge that his seat will remain in Coalition hands. He's even lined up a plum job with the United Nations.

It was apparent months ago that Downer was no longer interested in parliamentary business. He dodged question time for lunch with a journalist, skipped a whole day of Parliament for a spot of golf with Mark Vaile and even tried his hand at radio broadcasting.

Some people have welcomed his resignation. If the member for Mayo isn't interested in representing his electorate in Parliament, they suggest, then voters should replace him with someone who is.

But is it acceptable for former government members to leave early because they have lost government? Downer made a commitment to his electorate in the lead-up to the last election. Isn't it now his obligation to represent it to the best of his abilities? By leaving Parliament prematurely, the former foreign affairs minister is signalling that the duties of a backbencher are now beneath him.

There should be recognition of the shirking of responsibility that this entails. At the least, Downer (or his party) should contribute to the considerable costs of holding byelections.

Of course, the public funding of elections (including byelections) is one of the financial costs of democracy. In principle it is money well spent. But if there were financial penalties associated with not fulfilling a basic election commitment, such as 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 million to

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

Election funding is payable after both general elections and byelections. This means there is a financial incentive for political parties to precipitate a byelection - 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 main parties could benefit financially from a byelection. This is exactly what happened in Gippsland.

It is time for this loophole to be closed. It is the responsibility of each political party to preselect candidates who, in their estimation, are able to meet their electoral commitments.

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 preselect candidates who will stay for the full parliamentary term, whether or not their party forms government.

Of course, some politicians resign from Parliament for genuine reasons. Illness could prevent someone from discharging their duties properly and should be treated compassionately. But if the former member then takes on a high-paying corporate position - which is exactly what the former Gippsland MP Peter McGauran has done - it would be apparent that they left for other reasons.

There are also circumstances where it is very much in a party's interests to put forward a candidate who may 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 byelection 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.

*Josh Fear is a research fellow at the Australia Institute.*