

NEWS

New democracy reforms proposed

Benjamin Seeder

RESTRICTING pork barrelling, banning political donations by companies in certain industries, and introducing 'truth in political advertising' rules are among the changes needed to safeguard Tasmanian democracy, according to a new discussion paper released on Monday.

Think tank the Australia Institute released *Democracy Agenda for the 51st Tasmanian Parliament* a day before the new parliament was due to convene on Tuesday.

With a minority Liberal government reliant on independents to pass legisla-

tion in both chambers, now was the best time to push for democratic reforms, Australia Institute Tasmania director Eloise Carr said.

"Tasmanians have elected a power sharing parliament, which history shows can be among the most productive in instituting democratic and parliamentary reform," she said.

Tasmanian rules on political donations are more relaxed than any other state, and its protections against corruption are weak in comparison, according to the think tank.

The government's law to force disclosure of election

donations higher than \$5000 was condemned as "weak" by independents and Greens when it passed both chambers last year.

"Democracy should never be taken for granted, and fortifying Tasmania's democratic institutions is the responsibility of all Parliamentarians," Ms Carr said.

"Tasmania lags behind other jurisdictions when it comes to key accountability and transparency mechanisms that ensure good government, including on political donations and protections against corruption."

The paper identified 16 key reform areas, including

tightening rules on political donations, restricting election grants - a practice known as 'pork barrelling' - and boosting access for right to information.

The paper also proposed establishing a dedicated anti-corruption commission modelled on other states, and introducing fixed four-year parliamentary terms.

The paper also recommended an inquiry to investigate providing dedicated seats in parliament for indigenous Tasmanians.

Another proposed inquiry would look into banning companies involved in property development, fossil fuels

production, gambling or tobacco from making political donations.

Nelson MLC Meg Webb said the Democracy Agenda report's proposals were "timely and prescient".

"This plan recognises that improving the strength and health of our democracy requires not just big ticket reforms such as a more robust Integrity Commission," she said.

"It is equally necessary we focus on improving the day-to-day governance and accountability mechanisms within parliament, government and our public service."

The paper's other recom-

mendations included:

- Following the example of New Zealand, which discloses most cabinet documents within 30 days of final decisions
- Reviewing whistle-blower laws to ensure they encourage government accountability.

Ms Webb urged her fellow parliamentarians to support the proposed reforms.

"We should all be invested in ensuring a robust democracy, and there should be a broad willingness to implement reforms which strengthen the integrity and functionality of our Parliament."