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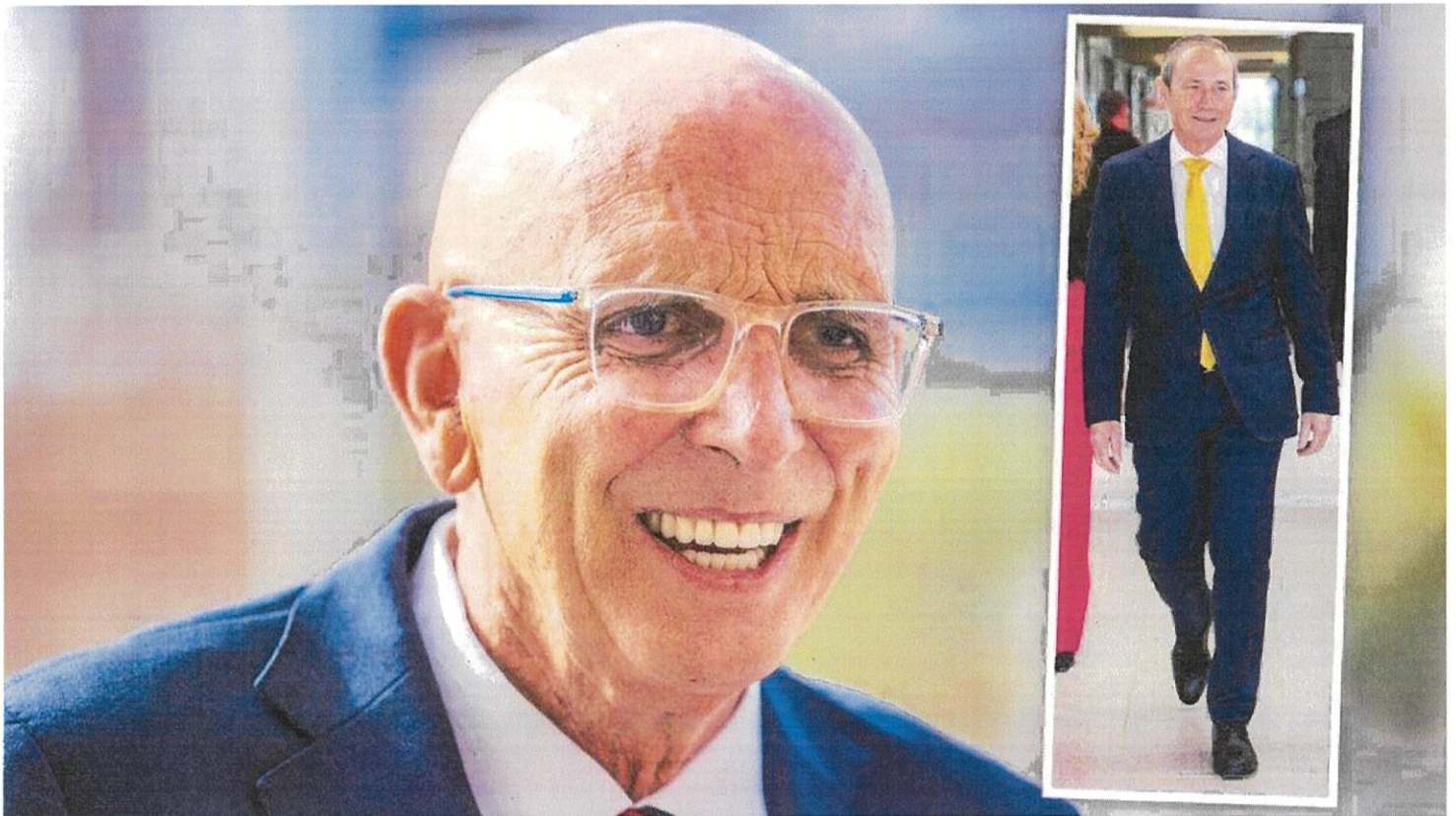
WA News Politics Roger Cook State Politics

EXCLUSIVE

## New laws call for a huge increase of taxpayer funding in return for donor transparency

**Josh Zimmerman** The West AustralianWed, 20 September 2023 2:00AM [Comments](#)

Josh Zimmerman



📷 Laws to be unveiled by Electoral Affairs Minister John Quigley on Wednesday drop the minimum threshold for the source of a donation to be declared from \$2500 to \$1000. Credit: The West Australian

Political parties will be forced to reveal their donations weekly rather than yearly – and daily during election campaigns – in a major revival of Cook Government reforms designed to lift the veil of secrecy on the money flowing into politics.

But the increased transparency comes at a big cost – with a near doubling of the taxpayer-funded reimbursements made to parties following election campaigns.

Laws to be unveiled by Electoral Affairs Minister John Quigley on Wednesday drop the minimum threshold for the source of a donation to be declared from \$2500 to \$1000.



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A legal loophole allowing WA parties to use the Federal disclosure system – which sets the minimum threshold at \$16,300 – will also be closed.

Lowering the disclosure threshold is designed to reduce the prevalence of so-called “dark money” in State politics – donations that cannot be tracked to their source.



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Newsbreak: Political donations

Foreign donations will be banned completely while new expenditure caps will limit the total amount that can be spent during an election campaign to just over \$10 million for a party contesting every available seat in both houses of Parliament.

The cap is set at \$130,000 for each electorate contested in the 59-seat Legislative Assembly and \$65,000 for each spot in what from 2025 will become a 37-seat Legislative Council.

Third-party spending, such as by unions or lobby groups not running candidates, will be capped at a maximum of \$500,000.

Underpinning the overhaul – characterised by Mr Quigley as delivering on a commitment to “transparency, integrity and accountability” – is a massive increase to electoral reimbursements.

Any political party or candidate that attracts more than 4 per cent of the first preference vote is currently paid \$2.26 for each vote they receive, a rate set 17 years ago but indexed annually in line with inflation.

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The money is used to reimburse parties for their spending on advertising, consultants, mail-outs and polling during election campaigns.

The Cook Government will argue the uplift is required to help political parties fund the additional administrative costs of complying with the new donations regime, which Mr Quigley said effectively demanded “real-time disclosures” once the writs for an election are issued.

The new reimbursement rate remains below NSW (\$5.30), Queensland (\$6.45), Victoria (\$7.01) and Tasmania (\$6) but well above the Commonwealth rate of \$3.23.

Unlike WA, NSW and Victoria also provide multi-million dollar administrative funds, with distributions to political parties and candidates based on the proportion of first-preference votes they receive.

*Together with Queensland, WA will have the most rapid disclosure time in Australia.*

Mr Quigley said the reforms would ensure a “level playing field” for parties and candidates when it came to financing their bids for Parliament.

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“Those who campaign in elections should have a reasonable opportunity to communicate with electors, but elections should not be able to be bought,” he said.

“One of the key features of the Bill is giving the public visibility of donations, giving Western Australians greater confidence in our state electoral processes and institutions.

“Together with Queensland, WA will have the most rapid disclosure time in Australia.”

The new Bill supersedes legislation introduced to Parliament by former Electoral Affairs Minister Stephen Dawson in 2020 but permitted to lapse without being fully debated prior to the 2021 election.



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Those laws – revived by Greens MP Brad Pettitt in a private members bill in June – also dropped the minimum donation threshold to \$1000 and banned foreign donations but proposed a much more modest public disclosure time frame: every three months rather than every week.

WA Labor's original 2020 move to cap spending during election campaigns was widely perceived as an attempt to curb the influence of billionaire Clive Palmer, who at the time was engaged in a high-stakes slanging match with Premier Mark McGowan over WA's COVID-era hard border.



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The Queenslander had also just spent more than \$83 million on advertising his United Australia Party during the 2019 Federal election.

Mr Quigley said an online reporting platform would be developed to centrally catalogue political donations above \$1000, which would need to be disclosed within seven days of receipt.



📷 Businessman Clive Palmer. Credit: MICK TSIKAS/AAPIMAGE

Once the writs for an election are issued, all donations would need to be disclosed by the end of the next business day.

The reforms also include the introduction of mandatory State campaign accounts to better track electoral spending and the registration of third-party campaigners and how-to-vote cards.

The penalties for breaching disclosure requirements or exceeding expenditure caps will also be strengthened, including fines of up to \$36,000 or three years in prison.

Distributing postal vote applications by political parties – a common mail-out tactic – will also be outlawed, unless in an approved form with the applications returned direct to the WA Electoral Commission.

The Cook Government will not follow NSW in banning donations from property developers and the liquor, gambling and tobacco industries.

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Mr Quigley has repeatedly rejected the idea on the basis that bans targeting individual sectors were relatively easy to circumvent through the use of third-party entities.

“The Government made an election commitment to ensure transparency, integrity, and accountability in political donations, and today we will deliver on that commitment,” he said.

““These are sensible, well considered and fair reforms which will provide greater confidence in the Western Australian election process.”

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